JESUS DID NOT EXIST

A DEBATE AMONG ATHEISTS

RAPHAEL LATASTER
W/ RICHARD CARRIER

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with

RICHARD CARRIER

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FOREWORD

By Richard Carrier

Why This Book Exists

In early 2014 I published *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*. It passed professional peer review. It was published by a major, well-respected academic press that specialized in Biblical Studies, Sheffield-Phoenix, the publishing arm of the University of Sheffield. And it is the first book of such tested merit to argue that Jesus probably did not exist. It argues instead that Jesus began life as a revelatory archangel, and was transferred to human history decades later through the writing of myths for educational, missionary, and propagandistic purposes. This would have proceeded, in both cause and procedure, much like the invention of the life and teachings and miracles of Moses, whom the mainstream Academy now concedes probably did not exist.

Now late in 2015, the book you hold in your hand, *Jesus Did Not Exist: A Debate Among Atheists* by Raphael Lataster, contains the first thorough and expert treatment of my argument in print.[1] In fact his chapter summarizing my book is the best brief summary I have read anywhere. One could skip directly to that chapter just for that purpose. And his book as a whole is the first analysis of its argument from anyone of graduate status or above in a relevant field that does not ignore or lie about its contents. Its motivation is evident from its author's argument: Biblical studies is inhabited by experts too close to the material to approach so controversial a question critically. Someone who *hasn't* settled their careers and access to grants and conference invites on there being a historical Jesus is indeed needed, to look objectively at what's going on.

That there is a problem is widely acknowledged within the field itself. It has been remarked on by numerous observers, from John Crossan, who would write the famous line describing most historical work on Jesus “a disguise for doing theology and calling it history, doing autobiography and calling it biography, doing Christian apologetics and calling it academic scholarship”, and who then ironically did pretty much the very same thing himself, to James Crossley, who has argued that historians keep constructing a historical Jesus that conveniently agrees with who they want Jesus to have been, even writing two whole books on the point: *Jesus in an Age of Terror* and *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism*.[2] That the problem is even more extensive than this is demonstrated by Hector Avalos in *The End of Biblical Studies*. These are all leading insiders, well qualified in the subject.

This is why it can be useful to have your methods and approaches observed and critiqued by someone who hasn’t been raised and taught on a body of old Christian faith assumptions repackaged as a consensus unconnected from its previous theological origins. You can’t see the hall of mirrors you are trapped in. But they can. Someone, though, who nevertheless has sufficient qualifications to evaluate your field informedly and skillfully. Lataster is a doctoral student and teacher in ‘Religious Studies’, a field that more than prepares someone to approach religions, religious claims, and religious scholarship with skill and insight. If someone in that position finds serious problems with the way your field is doing its work, you should at least listen. And consider what they have to say.

I concur that Lataster has done a good job of outlining the evidence and arguments and what its weaknesses may be on both sides. I do not necessarily agree with all of his arguments, assertions, and approaches. But I agree they all deserve to be taken seriously. And I do mean all. Do not commit the embarrassing fallacy of finding some few weak arguments or claims and then dismissing the rest because you can dismiss those. Remove those if you must, if any you find. Blot them out with a magic marker even. Then read and confront what remains. Because you cannot erode a mountain of strong points by removing any mole hills of weak points adorning it. The mountain remains. Answer it.

From my own experience, I can predict the games many will play. Some will just outright lie about what Lataster actually argues in this book, or not even read the book and criticize it in total ignorance of its actual contents, based on their imagining of what it must have said. Some will even lie about having read the book, even though their ignorance of its actual contents betrays them. A note to the wise: skimming or owning the book, is not reading it. Don't become a liar for Jesus. Or for the secular Academy. Actually read the book. Actually take it seriously. Actually respond to its strongest and most relevant points, not its weakest or most irrelevant ones.

Another way critics will respond to the weak and irrelevant as an excuse to not address the relevant and the strong, is to attack Lataster's tone, or his dialect in English, or their feeling insulted by his opinions or assertiveness, or some such triviality. This is as pathetic as saying you don't have to respond to a book that uses English spellings instead of American. Don't be that person. Address the facts as stated. Don't waste yours or anyone's time complaining about an irrelevant choice of vocabulary that offends you. Don't answer enraged with emotion. Answer with sound reason and a deep care for a true representation of the facts. Someone's choice of idiom is irrelevant. Their opinions of you are irrelevant. Though your being criticized will make you feel insulted, don't let your indignance generate a vomit of words as your rebuttal. Let your logic and attention to facts attend to the actual substance of what is being said. Ignore the rest. And ask yourself, at each point of disagreement you deem crucial, "Why is he wrong?" Allow for the possibility he isn't.

Though we don't share the same opinions and conclusions on all points, readers of this book will notice that a lot of Lataster's ideas were inspired by my work in *On the Historicity of Jesus* and its prequel *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, a dependence on both he openly acknowledges. He doesn't always reference where a thought or idea came from, and I don't deem it necessary for him to, especially as this is written as more of a popular book, and he has developed similar and original ideas independently as well. Just be aware that this book is largely a development on those books, and thus repeats a

lot of what's in them (though by no means all). His intention, apart from building on the direct analysis from his Master's thesis, is to look at all three books lately published on this issue and summarize and compare them: mine taking the negative (that Jesus probably didn't exist), and two taking the positive (that Jesus certainly did exist), which appeared immediately before mine, one by the late Maurice Casey, under the title *Jesus: Evidence and Argument Or Mythicist Myths?*, and the other by the eminent Bart Ehrman, under the title *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*. It has to be admitted that those two books don't come out well by comparison with mine.[3] Reflecting the arrogance and negligence plaguing the field as a whole, neither was published under peer review. *No* book dedicated to defending the historicity of Jesus has ever passed peer review. Not because none could. But because in their arrogant presumption, no one has ever thought it necessary. But you can't win this argument from the armchair. You have to vet your arguments for logical and factual accuracy, answering to qualified peers. You need to care about whether they hold up, rather than assume they must because "You can't be wrong."

Because unfortunately that is all that has so far happened from the Academy on this question. Our arguments are either assiduously avoided and never talked about, or the equivalent of preacher-pulpit Christian apologetics is deployed in defense of the faith. A reasoned, informed secular rebuttal is missing. Even from the secular ranks of the Academy. I keep assembled all the rebuttals to my thesis and my responses to them under the heading "List of Responses to Defenders of the Historicity of Jesus" on my blog.[4] Almost all of them are either from amateurs or from experts writing before they had access to my book (and thus do not count as rebuttals to it, but rather it to them). In fact only two rebuttals to my book exist from the Academy itself, neither in print nor peer reviewed, and both from Christian apologists: the liberal James McGrath (a non-Evangelical Christian, whose PhD in, presumably, New Testament Studies, is vague as to the extent of its training in historical methods and ancient history), and the conservative Kenneth Waters (an Evangelical Baptist minister whose only qualification is a PhD in 'Theology', not in history, ancient or otherwise).

Insofar as the Academy has decided to ignore what it considers amateurs in this debate, and since one cannot judge the case made in a book you have not read, those are the only two rebuttals experts in this field will evidently care about. So what do these two scholars have to say on the matter?

McGrath has only published responses to historicity on his personal blog (*Exploring Our Matrix*), and in an online trade publication (*Bible & Interpretation*) that is also not peer reviewed. In these open venues he has made such embarrassingly false claims about the ancient world in defense of the historicity of Jesus as to deeply call into question the competence of his opinion in the matter.[5] And he all too often makes wildly false claims about the arguments in my book, rather than addressing what it actually says.[6]

McGrath evinced this behavior even before reading my book. For example, he argued confidently that no Christians would erect inscriptions promoting their gospel because only government officials erected inscriptions. That this is wildly not true is bad enough, and that he wouldn't know it's untrue is worse, but that he was so arrogant in his ignorance that he never even thought to check and make sure before resting his argument on it, is worst of all. And indicative of the problem. Historians who would defend the historicity of Jesus aren't doing their jobs as historians. And all too often, they literally don't know what they are talking about. This is commonly observed in the frequency with which historicists claim the evidence for Jesus is as good as we have for Socrates, Alexander the Great, Spartacus, and Julius and Tiberius Caesar. That they would be so ignorant as to think that was true is shocking.[7] But more shocking is that they didn't even check before asserting it. What academic disease does this signify?

The example of inscriptions illustrates the other problem as well. McGrath falsely implied that I endorse the lack of early inscriptions as an argument for the non-existence of Jesus. In fact I have publicly rejected that argument and explained why it doesn't work (there are many reasons Christians would fail to erect such inscriptions even if Jesus did exist; just *not* the reason McGrath gave). McGrath routinely makes false claims like

this about what I or my book argue. Many far more galling than this. Such as claiming my book relies on conspiracy theories, when in fact my book repeatedly denounces them. Or claiming I don't adduce any allegorical meanings to explain Gospel pericopes but just assert they must have them, and using that as an argument against the merits of my book, when in fact I devote almost an entire chapter of the book to doing that, in fact not just adducing such meanings, but in many cases arguing *for* them, and citing peer reviewed scholarship that does the same – none of which facts McGrath informs his readers of. Or claiming I didn't make an argument for a conclusion but just asserted it in the book (such as that a given miracle story is not likely to be true, or that a given word can too easily have come from a targum to be certain it came from a source about Jesus), when in fact, in every case, the book contains an extensive argument for that conclusion. An argument he fails to tell his readers about (and thus certainly offers no rebuttal to).

It should be a fundamental requirement of competent and honest scholarship to correctly represent the arguments of anyone you disagree with, and rebut their actual arguments, not arguments they never made, or conveniently distorted variants of arguments they did make, or to falsely claim they didn't make any arguments to rebut. It is a disgrace for a scholar to use falsehood like this. Worse even to do so as arguments against a book they are reviewing. Yet these aren't the only instances. McGrath does this *a lot*. Why? If historicity is so evidenced as to be certain, why do arguments against it have to be misrepresented to rebut them? Is it because the *actual* arguments *can't* be rebutted? So fake arguments have to be contrived to knock down instead? That does not make it sound like historicity is so certain to me.

The only other critic so far whom the Academy would deem worth heeding is Kenneth Waters, whose only rebuttal to my book came in the form of an unrecorded debate performance that bewildered the audience at a regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.[8] As my summary after the event describes it:

> Dr. Waters simply didn't actually respond to the arguments of [*On the Historicity of Jesus*]. He ignored most of them, misunderstood some of them, and tried to obscure them all with stock Christian apologetics rather than taking the facts and methodology seriously.

> In all, it was a fairly useless debate. The only reassuring fact was that the audience seemed as bewildered by his line of attack as anyone. This encounter adds yet more evidence in support of the conclusion that we need to stop taking Christian fundamentalists seriously. They are ideologues, not objective professionals, when anything that challenges their beliefs is encountered. We need secular scholars to debate this theory. Christian believers who cannot abide even the thought of the thesis should just admit they cannot have anything honest or well-considered to say about it.

This was evidenced by the fact that his tactics were all the trickery of firebrand apologetics and not sober scholarly critique.

Waters repeatedly argued by assertion. For example, he simply insisted loudly and repeatedly that "brothers of the Lord" *cannot* mean baptized Christians, without offering any argument for why it can't. And despite the fact that Paul declares all baptized Christians brothers of the Lord and even explains why and how they are such (Romans 8:29, 8:15 and Galatians 4:5). A fact I actually *document* in my book, and that in turn is a fact he didn't even tell the audience (nor, obviously, rebut). Similarly, Waters just gainsaid my interpretations of various New Testament verses without telling the audience what my arguments and evidences were for those interpretations (and of course, in result, offering no rebuttal to them either). He likewise used distortion as a tactic, for example quoting Romans 1:3 as saying "descended from David" (thus choosing the most tendentious translation), when in fact the word "descended" is not in the Greek. Waters simply ignored my argument that the word that *is* in the Greek (*ginomai*, 'became') is also the word Paul uses for *divinely manufactured* bodies, not birthed ones (such as of Adam and our future resurrection bodies: 1 Corinthians 15:20, 37, 45 and 2 Corinthians 5). He likewise asserted many verses as supporting historicity, without even mentioning (much less rebutting) the reasons given in my book for why they are not. He thus refused to even address the book. In a rebuttal to the book. Why?

Waters similarly demonstrated his ignorance of essential background facts, such as rudimentary details of the ancient cosmology assumed by Paul and the earliest Christians and Jews of similar mind, even though my book explains this (with primary evidence and cited scholarship). It's bad enough that he is too uninformed to critique the book. It's worse that the book would have informed him *had he read it*. His failure on this point

demonstrates that he did not. One has to ask why. Why would he not read the book he was asked to rebut, before a formal academic society no less? And how could he be so certain a book he had not read was wrong? He did this again and again. For example, making absurdly false claims about the writings of Philo of Alexandria, and resting his case thereon. Or insisting, just as absurdly, that when Hebrews says Melchizedek was "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, and remains a priest continually" (from 7:1-3), Hebrews was not describing a divine being or archangel.

Waters also displayed alarmingly biased failures of logic. For example, he argued that if one myth differs *at all* from a later myth, then the second myth *cannot* be emulating or inspired by the first myth. This is a common Christian apologetic tactic: to insist that no parallels can exist between Jesus and other savior gods because those other savior gods were different from Jesus. Never mind that they immediately reject that thinking when they concede that the nativity myth for Jesus was emulating and inspired by the nativity myth for Moses. Suddenly all the differences between those two stories don't matter. They only matter when the conclusion is too shocking for them to accept. Which is the very definition of reaching a conclusion from bias and not reason. Needless to say, Waters did not address either the *actual* parallels I argued influenced the Christian mythology (which included prior myths both pagan and Jewish) or the evidence I presented that they could not be coincidental. He simply insisted they were coincidental. Without argument. Not even an argument of his own. Much less a rebuttal to mine. This is dismal. Why would he think this an appropriate response?

Combine these two responses to *On the Historicity of Jesus*, which betray a devotion to dishonesty, ignorance, and defiance of logic, with the two prior books defending historicity, which do much the same, and historicity is increasingly looking like an indefensible position. Were it capable of being defended with correct facts and valid logic, surely it would have been by now. And as you'll see through the course of this book, when Lataster examined the sources for himself, he ended up confirming this judgment.

Before leaving you to begin this book, I should close with one last point. I am often asked if, after the release of my book, anyone has adduced any evidence for the historicity of Jesus that the book neglected to address. So far, after around a year and a half now (as of my writing this), there has been only one item of evidence so proposed. This is the fact that Hebrews 4:15 says (in the ASV translation) "we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." How this argues for historicity might not be obvious, but the idea is that surely to be tempted "in all points" like us, Jesus had to have been a historical person. But that is a non sequitur.

An angel certainly can be tempted. Satan was, and failed. And Philippians 2:6-8 says Jesus was so tempted, and passed. Thus reversing the failure of Satan. (Who also, I should add, did not exist, despite being believed a historical figure.) Notably, this angelic Jesus was tempted to seize all the powers that would make him equal to God. That certainly entails being tempted in all points like we are. Indeed, tempted in even more points than that (and the latter entails the former). Genesis 11:6 and 1 Enoch make clear that men and women (and angels) seeking equality with God was to God the most frightening of sins anyone could be tempted to. And in fact I did discuss this point in my book, in respect to Hebrews 2:17. There I wrote:

> The notion that Jesus had to 'become like his brothers in all respects' (Heb. 2.17) is sometimes adduced as evidence a historical Jesus is meant, but this does not follow, nor is it all that plausible. This phrase is very strangely worded if a regular man is meant, who was born to human parents and grew up and toured the country as a man (and as a celibate preacher and miracle worker besides). You do not normally describe this as a supernatural preexistent being 'becoming like' [*homoioō*] a human. And 'in all respects' translates the phrase *kata panta*, 'according to everything', in other words, everything that matters to being someone's 'brother', a fact known only from scripture. Thus, to make the scripture true, Jesus had to be sufficiently 'like us' in all the respects that would establish us as his brothers. Therefore (at least this theologian is inferring) he 'must' [*opheilō*] have put on a body of flesh so he could be tempted and suffer and die like us. Here Jesus is not being 'born' as one of us but simply 'becoming sufficiently like' us. And it appears we know this happened only because it's theologically required by scripture and logic.[9]

This accords perfectly well with the Minimal Mythicist Thesis, in which Jesus becomes incarnate in the lower heavens (or any hidden place or supernal realm) to be killed by Satan. All temptation is there met, and resisted. Jesus therefore has been tempted "according to everything" that theologically matters, in the same way he had become like his worshippers "according to everything" that theologically matters. The phrases are identical (*kata panta*). The sentiment is identical (using *homoiotês*, the cognate of *homoioō*). So we cannot decide from this passage which is meant, a mere earthly man who was tempted in everything, or an incarnated heavenly angel who was. It's effect on either hypothesis is nil.

This is what I have found to be the case for all the evidence anyone has ever adduced from the Epistles (once we exclude those known to be forged): it is ambiguous as to whether an earthly or celestial Jesus is being referred to. The Gospels I found wholly symbolically fictional and not even interested in actual history. And the Jesus in them I found to be so very like other mythical persons of the period. And then I found that no other evidence can be shown to be independent of the Gospels. At the very least, putting all of that together should make agnosticism about the historicity of Jesus a credible conclusion. And as you shall see, this is Lataster's conclusion as well.

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INTRODUCTORY CLARIFICATIONS

Why Me? Why This?

If an overly long defense of my credentials does not interest you, feel free to skip ahead.

In this book, with assistance from independent historian Richard Carrier,[10] I shall consider the plausibility of Jesus' ahistoricity or non-existence, sometimes referred to as the Jesus Myth Theory.[11] Most people are *historicists*. They assert that Jesus definitely existed. I am not so sure. Gasp! Just who is this upstart who draws ire from believers and non-believers alike, for daring to question the unquestionable? I have been criticised by those of both camps for a number of reasons. One common criticism is that I am on the fringes of scholarship.[12] That is irrelevant, and also untrue. It is irrelevant because the truth is not a democracy. It is not determined by the consensus, scholarly or otherwise. While the consensus does matter, it can also be wrong, as proven by the history of progress.

And, of course, scientific consensus is usually determined by mounds of evidence; not so for the consensus regarding Jesus. Rather obviously, all views currently in vogue were initially fringe. That goes for all religions and scientific innovations as well. That also goes for Darwin's theory of evolution, and heliocentricity.[13] There are times when most experts are wrong. If the consensus were always right, it would seem very unlikely that we would make progress in our never-ending quest to find 'the truth'. Note that Old Testament minimalism – the view that the Old Testament has little to no historical value – was also extremely unpopular once, though it is now quite mainstream. The same may happen with the New Testament minimalism that I, and my 'hyper-sceptical' colleagues, endorse. If it is now reasonable to think of Abraham and Moses (who spoke with God and performed miracles) as purely fictional characters in greatly exaggerated stories designed to highlight the importance of the Jewish people, then it may one day be reasonable to think that Jesus (who also spoke with God and performed miracles) too is similarly fictional. [14]

That I am fringe is also untrue because questioning Jesus' historical existence is a relatively minor part of my work, incidentally a part of which I am not very passionate about – though ironically this may become the greatest source of my infamy. I do much more mainstream and sceptical work concerning Christian claims of miracles and the existence of God.[15] Even when touching on this verboten topic, I am not a *mythicist* per se.[16] I do not assert that Jesus did not exist. I am a Historical Jesus *agnostic*. That is, I am unconvinced by the case for the Historical Jesus, and find several reasons to be doubtful. To compare these terms to those often used when discussing the issue of God's existence, the 'historicist' is the equivalent of the 'theist', and the 'mythicist' is the equivalent of the 'strong atheist'. The oft-forgotten 'Historical Jesus agnostic' is the equivalent of, well, the 'God agnostic'.

I'd like to throw one more term into the mix. Not all 'atheists' are 'strong atheists'. Some are simply 'agnostics'. I would like to propose, then, that we use the term '*ahistoricists*' to encompass both the ardent 'mythicists' and the less certain 'agnostics'. This avoids the false dichotomy, which I think historicists (much like theists) have been taking advantage of. They act as if you are either a reasonable historicist, or one of those crazy mythicists. With my proposed terminology, it shall become much more transparent that there are many more scholars that question Jesus' historicity than is typically thought; that this is not such a crazy idea. Unfortunately, 'ahistoricist' can be taken to mean 'mythicist', so perhaps the less impressive 'doubter', or 'sceptic', could also work as a term to combine both the mythicists and the agnostics.

Despite drawing my more sceptical conclusions from my own logical theorising and the research of more mainstream scholars (a fascinating part of this discussion, as we shall see throughout), such as with the dates assigned to the sources, I have been accused of not being a 'real scholar'. After all a 'real scholar' should have a PhD and should also publish in the academic channels, rather than the popular (and self-published!) realm.[17] This is also technically irrelevant as it should be my arguments that are scrutinised, not my academic credentials or moral character. Nevertheless, this is also untrue to an extent. I am actually finalising my

PhD, am rather prolific in publishing in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, I already tutor, lecture, and mark undergraduate students, edit journals, edit manuscripts, assist with research, referee articles written by other scholars, review academic books, arrange academic conferences, present at such conferences, and partake in many other projects that serve the academic community. I teach Religious Studies at a top university that outranks (concerning the Humanities, and overall) the teaching institutions of many of my critics, and have already won an award there for excellence in teaching. Unlike some other Jesus sceptics, I am certainly no 'outsider' to the Academy.

A similar criticism may be that I am in the wrong field – Religious Studies instead of Christian History or New Testament. This is quite erroneous as Religious Studies is somewhat of the broader field that includes the others, and as I shall effectively argue throughout this book, it may actually be ideal that those investigating Jesus' historicity precisely be those that are not experts in the Historical Jesus; precisely those that are 'outsiders' to what are seemingly the most relevant fields. Though it may initially sound absurd, this directly addresses one of the most popular criticisms of scholars who question Jesus' historicity – that they are not experts in the right field and so should keep their opinions to themselves. For one, consider that Historical Jesus researchers are experts on *lower level* questions such as whether a particular saying of Jesus is likely to have been spoken by the real Jesus, or whether it was a later fabrication.

They are experts, and they are very smart. Nevertheless, such scholars are generally *not* suitably equipped to investigate or argue for the *higher level* issue of Jesus' very existence. Similarly, screwdrivers are very, very good tools, but it would be pointless to use one to hammer a nail. Nor should a brilliant rocket scientist be consulted about treating seborrheic dermatitis. The existence of the Historical Jesus is taken for granted by such New Testament experts, being paradigmatic to the field (likewise the general veracity of the Gospels), and is generally not argued for.[18] And indeed, being paradigmatic to the field, it would appear counter-intuitive for such scholars to seriously ask the question, since a negative result would effectively invalidate and nullify their life's work, and their future career prospects. Paradoxically, it may be ideal that those investigating the

question be historians, classicists, analytical philosophers, and Religious Studies scholars of other specialisations.[19]

For a crude comparison, these mainstream experts of the Historical Jesus might be as useful as experts on what the real Iron Man really said and did. The appeal to what experts on the Historical Jesus think on the matter of the Historical Jesus' very existence seems very specious indeed; consider also what conclusion we would get if we asked presenters at a UFO convention if they believed in alien visitations. Ironically, given the fact that many historicist scholars like to compare us more sceptical folk with Christian fundamentalists, a startling analogy can be drawn with the field of Theology. The theologian's job is to ascertain what it is that God wants from us, and similar matters. It is not the theologian's job to question God's very existence. They assume God's existence. It is, however, the job of philosophers of religion, to determine if God does indeed exist. That they haven't proven God's existence is beside the point.

Interestingly, while mainstream historicists turn their noses up at the likes of Richard Carrier for not being specialist New Testament scholars, nobody seems to mind that prominent atheistic philosopher of religion Graham Oppy is not a theologian.[20] And of course, given that theologians are about as likely to personally be believers in God as bears are to shit in the woods, it seems unreasonable for us to expect that they would conduct investigations into God's existence with complete objectivity. It would seem fruitless to ask the theologian if they believe that God exists. Also, since they tend not to look into God's existence, theologians tend to be quite poor at proving God's existence. Likewise, the historicist scholars are ill-equipped and ill-motivated to tackle the question of Jesus' historicity.[21] Hence their common tactic of simply pointing out that all their colleagues agree.

Rare is the scholar who is truly disinterested regarding the paradigms of their field, and who actively works to destroy their own career, and academic discipline. A comparison can be drawn with a frustrated sufferer of a skin condition consulting with the most respected experts, dermatologists. Frustrations can arise by the ignorance over the causes for such conditions, and the eventual prescribing of products that 'manage'

rather than cure, and can cause adverse effects, and possibly even worsen the condition. What is interesting is that it is the gastroenterologist that may be more suited to the role, with doctors as early as the 1930s proposing a link between the skin and the intestinal biome; a link that is now becoming increasingly established.[22] I may be cynical, but it may be in dermatologists' best interests to avoid deferring to the still relatively 'fringe' – though it continues to gain traction – hypothesis of a gut-skin axis.[23]

Also, a different skill-set is required. Rather than the *best* people to consult on this issue, specialist Historical Jesus researchers could very well be the *worst* – and I will effectively prove this to you in the first two proper sections of this book. My thinking here echoes Craffert's recent work:

> If my analysis is correct, current historical Jesus research is still trapped in a caretaker mode of historiography in which the main objective is to establish the credibility of the sources and the historicity of the reported words and deeds of Jesus.[24]

For historicists to focus on the fact that many ahistoricists are not employed in 'relevant fields', is to ignore the contributions that can arise from interdisciplinary studies.[25] Academics and lay-people alike need not learn Greek or fully acquaint themselves with ancient Greek culture, in order to dismiss Greek mythology as historically accurate. Similarly, historians (such as Carrier), secular scholars of religion (such as myself), and philosophers (such as Law), from outside the field of Biblical studies, could provide immense contributions on methodology. Unsurprisingly, like Craffert, I find an interdisciplinary approach necessary.

I posit that those more suitably-equipped, and with less questionable motives, would be secular historians who, though it may seem odd, are specifically *not* experts in the New Testament or the Historical Jesus,[26] and also secular scholars of religion, familiar with the philosophy,[27] history, and sociology, of Christianity *and related faiths*.[28] This is especially important when we consider that many New Testament experts are oblivious to the vast pre-Christian Jewish literature that expresses belief in, amongst other things relevant to Christianity's origins, a celestial messiah. Furthermore, the Religious Studies scholars are

typically very knowledgeable about non-cognitivist religions, and realise that religions are not always concerned with the facts.

In other words, proper Religious Studies scholars will be more prepared, than, say, a specialist Historical Jesus or Christian Origins researcher, who is undoubtedly interested in self-preservation, to examine the relevant texts without the assumptions that they describe literal historical events.[29] (One particularly noteworthy example is that of Sarah Balstrup, who brazenly and incidentally included the phrase, "if he was indeed a historical person", when making mention of Jesus' alleged lifetime.)[30] Above all, these consults ought to be proficient in logic, critical thinking, argumentation, and probability theory – we are, after all, trying to determine what is the most probable hypothesis, or, at least, if a particular scholar's case is sound.[31] If what I have said makes an ounce of sense, it should be clear that our 'outsider' status is not a weakness, but a strength. It may even be necessary. Consider a recent experience of mine.

A paper I had written on a disturbing, ridiculous, and idiosyncratic method used by historicists was rejected by a prominent society of Biblical literature, but was later accepted by a general historical research organisation – forgive me if I feel a smug sense of vindication.[32] This paper dealt with what I call Ehrman's law, which shall be explained later and discussed throughout this book. My presentation of the paper was very successful, with almost everybody (a room full of proper historians) agreeing with me that this method used by Biblical 'historians' is ridiculous and not typical of historians proper.

The one objector turned out to be a sociologist rather than a historian, is a Christian, failed to backup his claim that many other historians do likewise, and eventually agreed with my conclusions. He – surprisingly – was also happy to agree that Mark is likely an allegory of Paul's writings, which we shall certainly discuss later. At the conference, I was also advised to avoid attempting to publish the eventual article/s through journals associated with organisations such as the Society of Biblical Literature, as it would apparently be a waste of time. Clearly outsiders perceive these self-styled experts very differently from how the alleged experts perceive themselves; truly a salient point.

Now the appeal to authority is often taken to be a logical fallacy, particularly when it is the evidence and arguments of the authorities we should be convinced by, and not merely their opinions, but it is often reasonable to trust the experts, such as climate change scientists, or electrical engineers. After all, we don't all have the expertise, time and specialist knowledge to figure everything out for ourselves. But if what I am implying is coherent, the self-styled experts are actually not the authorities we should be appealing to. They are effectively crypto-theologians, who have almost as much vested interest in Jesus' existence as believers do.[33]

Also, while it is true that I have not formally undertaken undergraduate units or subjects on Biblical history or the Biblical languages, I have through my postgraduate work (including professional supervision and self-guided training in the relevant areas) specialised in the New Testament, and early Christianity, published on these topics through peer-reviewed academic journals, and even taught on them at some of the world's most prestigious institutions and universities. Furthermore, I am proficient in what is arguably the most important language of all: logic. My work in the philosophy of religion, which I shall very much return to after the conclusion of this project, has given me the ability to easily – and brutally – identify logical errors.

Nowhere do I say that Ehrman or Casey have mistranslated the ancient Greek sources. But they do make logical errors, which should have us questioning the soundness of their conclusions. The errors of logic that they make are "as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore".[34] Truth be told, I am hesitant to invest the incredible amounts of time, energy, and money, into learning several ancient languages so that I can better read the Bible – which I, and we all, know to be filled with fictions. The same cannot be said for mathematics and logic, the purest and most important languages of all, which have applications in virtually every aspect of our lives. If only the believers and secular historicists thought so too.

The better question would be “why not me/us?” Carrier and I have many suitable qualifications for this endeavour, and between us, our work on the Historical Jesus (and skepticism regarding Christianity) has been received by millions, and has also attracted positive attention from scholars.[35] This collaboration should truly prove a useful endeavour. We complement each other well, somewhat patching up each other’s apparent deficiencies: Carrier is a historian proper and is proficient in Ancient Greek, while I specialise in Christian claims (both historical and philosophical), am not so aggressively anti-religious, and am certainly no outsider to the Academy.[36] While it is true that I am not a specialist historian and have not learned Ancient Greek (none of which is necessarily relevant),[37] the same cannot be said of Carrier. And while Carrier is an outsider to the Academy and is fairly anti-Christian (none of which is necessarily relevant),[38] the same cannot be said of me.

A criticism I encounter often on the blogosphere – just as with Robert Price and Richard Carrier – is that I offer nothing new. I dispute that, and my Master’s thesis and associated books and articles on the topic seem to refute that. Let us unpack that a little, to realise how significant my publishing efforts have been. My successful postgraduate thesis means that it received the backing of at least one supervisor, the head of my Religious Studies department, the highly regarded University of Sydney, and several examiners, from other (local and international) universities. The suite of articles means that several referees, editors, and academic publishers deemed it worthy. The aforementioned paper on a particularly woeful method used by historicist scholars was accepted by the organisers of a prestigious History conference. Even my earlier popular book on the topic had been reviewed and praised by proper scholars in my field. All this adds scholarly credibility. This is no longer a crackpot theory that has long been refuted. This is the real deal, and the scholarly world cannot help but notice. As I continue to stress the inadequacy of historicists’ methods, the number of scholars in the relevant and related fields who will question Jesus’ historicity, or at least find it worthy of questioning, will grow.

Also, various scholars have a role to play. For example, Earl Doherty, building on the work of those before him, formulated an interesting theory

on Christian origins. I effectively endorsed that theory as reasonable, and Carrier then – and much more significantly – put the theory to the test, probabilistically, finding it to be the theory that best fits the currently available evidence.[39] Scholars like myself, then, have an important role in critiquing Carrier's work and, if it is found to be sound, we have a duty to be supporting and promoting it. Even if it draws the ire of the public, and our peers. No less should be expected from honest academics, who are simply interested in the truth. We may also like to contrast Carrier's efforts with the work of historicists like Ehrman and Casey, which is so fruitfully done in this book. I did not formulate the theory that Doherty earlier adopted/refined (and nor did I 'invent' the notion that the unreliability of the Gospels could make it more probable that Jesus did not exist);[40] and yet I am playing an important role in arguing for its plausibility and in promoting the theory to scholars and laypeople alike.

I could concede that the criticism I received is true and still note its irrelevance. A scholar can contribute greatly to public knowledge simply by reintroducing the Academy and the populace to a concept that had previously been rejected by a people unready for it. And something is in the air now. People are ready to hear it. Great contributions are also to be made in refining previous research, so that it is more robust and defensible. Indeed, new discoveries (particularly those involving the varied beliefs of early Christians) may make previously unpopular theories more plausible. It may also be the case that asserting that Jesus sceptics are offering nothing new is an attempt to indicate that we are only considering old and long-refuted matters. This too is erroneous as 'the problem of Paul' and the poor state of the sources for Jesus have never been resolved, and again, new evidence can reinvigorate old arguments.

In a story as old as time, I did not actually *intend* to increase scholarly and popular interest in a question that was considered by most to be dead. With a passion for religion and education, a supervisor who specialises in early Christianities, and in need of a topic for my Master's degree that would be far more manageable than a comprehensive treatment of pantheism, I (un)fortuitously arrived at this topic. Particularly after being intrigued by a few books espousing the mythicist view, and being unconvinced by Bart Ehrman's recent book for historicity. I am simply an

honest empiricist who leaves his preferences at home and follows the evidence where it leads, and one that just needed a topic so that I could finally complete my postgraduate studies and become an educator on religion. I have even been somewhat reluctant about being a 'prominent figure' in this new wave of scepticism over the Historical Jesus – it is after all a very unpopular niche. This is a far cry from the portrayal of Jesus agnostics and mythicists as being the mirror image of fundamentalists, who want to prove Jesus' ahistoricity so as to attack Christianity.

Nay, this book may well be my last significant contribution to the debate, as I grow a little weary of being an academic pariah constantly subjected to intellectual bullying,[41] and move on to pursue the tastier, fatter, and lower-hanging fruit that is the miraculous and supernatural claims made by theists/Christians.[42] Whatever my intentions, my work has now reached over a million people and counting, thanks largely to my debates, podcast interviews, my heavily summarised article in The Conversation[43] that was republished by The Washington Post (a significant moment for this issue entering the mainstream media),[44] and peer-reviewed journal articles. With the latter, I find numerous 'allies' in the Academy. Well-qualified scholars that are happy to question Jesus' historical existence. People that supposedly don't exist if the majority historicists are to be believed. It is also noteworthy that these articles appear in various journals, published by different academic presses – none of which is Sheffield Academic Press, who published Carrier's book. In other words, we cannot blame a single person or group for this 'proliferation' of proper scholarship on the question of Jesus' historicity. There are clearly a lot of scholars, all over the world, that are willing to question this paradigm, if not deny it outright.

Those familiar with my earlier *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God* may wonder why this book should be necessary, and decry its derivative nature, especially when the earlier book was already so successful in not only convincing lay audiences, but notifying scholars too, of the reasonableness in questioning Jesus' historicity. For example, Hector Avalos, asserted that "Although I am not a Jesus mythicist, I do think that Lataster makes a good case that one cannot simply dismiss all versions or all aspects of Jesus mythicism" and recognised that I "may be among the

first to have a thesis sympathetic to Jesus Mythicism approved by a world-class university".[45]

Christopher Hartney declared that "Lataster goes through the numerous arguments that demonstrate that the story of Jesus must have taken place. He does a good job of dismissing all these", and supports "the ongoing validity of the questions" posed.[46] Significantly, he adds that I revive "some interesting issues concerning the complicity that Western academia has when nurturing blind spots to particular historical proofs and particular faiths". Professor Carole Cusack is cautiously supportive and notes that the harshest critics, if they have seriously engaged with the material at all, tend to be "clear conservative Christians".[47] I must add that I was pleasantly surprised to receive such unexpected support. I shouldn't have been. No one but the Religious Studies scholar is best placed to understand that religion is not just simply a collection of facts. [48] Furthermore, many Religious Studies scholars are aware that even 'secular' studies concerning religion are often entangled with theological concerns, particularly within the areas of Christian origins and Islamic origins.[49]

While there is a heavy focus on doubting the Historical Jesus in that book, as it was published soon after my Master's thesis, it also touches on Christian claims made about Jesus and theistic claims about God. It intended to portray a very concise case against all three issues. This book is far more focussed and detailed,[50] concerning itself only with the atheistic disagreements over the existence of the Historical Jesus. The opportunity to incorporate highly significant recent developments also presented itself, namely the publishing of Maurice Casey's (historicist) and Richard Carrier's (mythicist) books on the topic, so that the focus need not just be on Bart Ehrman (historicist) and myself (Historical Jesus agnostic).[51] This book is also more formal in tone, and yet is still a little light-hearted and accessible to the general public.[52]

It also gives an opportunity to respond to several other scholars who have since weighed in, such as James McGrath and John Dickson (Christian believers who clearly didn't get the memo). As for the repetition, I apologise, but this is unavoidable, for a plethora of reasons.

For one, any book on Jesus' historicity will sound familiar, given that we are constantly arguing, typically with the same tired arguments, over the very same handful of sources. Also, this book acts largely as a meta-review, so will naturally derive from the work of scholars such as Ehrman, Casey, Carrier, and also myself. If it seems derivative, it is because it is supposed to be derivative. I truncated sections where appropriate, often from the chapter focusing on my work, particularly as this whole book is essentially my case for agnosticism. Apologies also if some sections are a little haphazard, which is partly caused by virtual page-by-page analyses of the other authors' books. Before we start our analysing however, we should first clarify what it is when we say, 'Jesus'.

Which Jesus?

Before we begin to question Jesus' existence we must first be clear about which Jesus is being discussed. This is not a book about the ***Christ of Faith*** or the ***Biblical Jesus***. That is, the Jesus that supposedly was – and still is! – divine, was born of a virgin, walked on water, was raised from death by his father/himself, and so forth. Atheists already agree that that Jesus did not, and does not, exist. Instead, this book is about the ***Historical Jesus***, so-called by non-Christian scholars (and we shall call such scholars Jesus historicists). This Jesus is largely the same character as portrayed in the New Testament, with many of the obvious embellishments removed. Interestingly, there is no one Historical Jesus, as scholars are at liberty to present their own views on what Jesus really said and did. Indeed, respected New Testament expert John Dominic Crossan rightly believes this to be an embarrassment to the field:

> But that stunning diversity is an academic embarrassment. It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.[53]

Similarly, Helmut Koester remarked that "The vast variety of interpretations of the historical Jesus that the current quest has proposed is bewildering".[54] To make matters a little more confusing, we should consider that 'the Bible' or 'the New Testament' is not merely one big document, but a collection of books by very different authors. They are also very different Christians. Even within individual books we find influences of different Christians, sometimes at different times as the text becomes edited over time. We must then consider that there is also not one Biblical Jesus. And I do not mean that in the sense that there are many and varied believers today that have many and varied views about Jesus. To many Jesus mythicists (those that believe that Jesus is entirely fictional) and Jesus agnostics (those not convinced of Jesus' historicity) Paul's view of Jesus is very different to the traditional and Gospel-influenced Christ of Faith.

We could call this the ***Celestial Jesus***. It is actually a mainstream view that there are multiple influences in the New Testament texts, and that virtually guarantees that the various authors and editors would differ as to their beliefs about Jesus. For simplicity, however, we can refer to the Biblical Jesus, or more specifically, the ***Gospel Jesus***, as the general version of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels and held dear by believers, while the Celestial Jesus refers to the possible early Christian view of a Jesus that did not appear on Earth, as portrayed in the Pauline Epistles. Note that this could also apply to other (non-Gospel) books of the New Testament, such as James and Hebrews, as we shall see. Also, while we atheists would conclude from an originally and purely Celestial Jesus to no Jesus at all, the believer may wish to accept the former, and evolve their religious beliefs.[55] This is but one of many reasons why such work is not actually anti-Christian, as I shall soon explain further.[56]

The picture is not yet confusing enough, so let us also consider the ***Actual Jesus of History***. This is the Jesus that actually did exist, if Jesus existed at all. To the mainstream believer, this figure would be identical with the Biblical Jesus, and to arguably some early believers – and perhaps alternative Christians today – this figure would be identical with the Celestial Jesus. To most mainstream non-Christians, the Actual Jesus of History will of course be the Historical Jesus – whichever one of the latter they prefer at the time. It is important to note this distinction, that what I and fellow atheistic scholars call the Historical Jesus may be different to the Actual Jesus of History, so that believers understand why I call this a debate among atheists, and why they should actually be applauding me when I question the existence of the so-called Historical Jesus.

A Debate Among Atheists

I assert that questioning the existence of the so-called Historical Jesus is something that should only concern atheists, or non-Christians. It is obviously a bone of contention among atheists, especially given that some will be weary of incessantly arguing with Christians over miraculous claims so that arguing over a less important and more challenging historical question becomes unnecessary and tiresome. But I also assert that Christians should not become involved in this debate, nor should we non-believers thrust it upon them. Ill-considered outcry over what I have just said is unavoidable and has already begun. For this, Biblical historian John Dickson cries foul, accusing me of "intellectual bigotry".[57] Christian apologists like Dickson are focussing on a minor and oft-unstated reason why I proclaim this to be a debate among atheists. In fact, I have several practical and rational reasons.

Firstly, such work questions the Historical Jesus. This is the Historical Jesus so-called by atheistic scholars. This is clearly not the same Jesus, generally the Biblical Jesus, that Christians believe in. In other words, we must remember that these are two completely different characters. We must note that Christians do not believe in this Historical Jesus. In fact, they would consider such a view blasphemous. To them, it is unthinkable that Jesus was just a man, performed no miracles, and was actually a very insignificant figure during his own lifetime. Christians should actually be praising my efforts to argue against this heretical view of Jesus and my bemoaning of the scholars' inconsistency regarding which portions of the Gospels are declared as 'true'! Nevertheless, the secular historicists and the mythicists/agnostics both blaspheme the Christians' Jesus.[58] We already agree that Jesus Christ didn't exist, and we wish to focus on the Historical Jesus, which is not necessarily an anti-Christian endeavour.

Recall that one of the most vocal anti-Christians of recent times, Christopher Hitchens, believed in the Historical Jesus.[59] Consider also that many Christians do not believe in God or the Christ of Faith, and some even doubt or deny the Historical Jesus. One 'pro-Christian'

Religious Studies scholar even expressed to me their opinion that dispelling the notion of a Historical Jesus actually frees Christians from such evidential burdens. Consider also that there are many believers who accept that the evidence for their beliefs about Jesus/God is very poor. Finally, note that refuting the Historical Jesus (and the Gospel Jesus), and effectively promoting an alternative (the Celestial Jesus), leaves open the possibility that the latter did exist, so that this sort of argument doesn't necessarily 'end Christianity', but only certain streams of Christianity – of which there are many.[60]

This is the primary reason why I try to exclude Christians from this debate. While not everyone will agree with how I frame the discussion, [61] it is simply how I prefer to do it. And it seems that I have some support from an unlikely source:

> … the majority of scholars who have dealt with these matters over the past century or so have concluded that the Jesus who existed is not the Jesus of the stained-glass window or the second-grade Sunday school class. The Jesus of popular imagination (there are actually a large number of Jesuses in various popular imaginations) is a "myth" in the sense that mythicists use the term: he is not the Jesus of history.[62]

Though for different reasons, I am in agreement with Ehrman, especially when he adds that "humanists, agnostics, atheists, mythicists and anyone else who does not advocate belief in Jesus would be better served to stress that the Jesus of history is not the Jesus of modern Christianity".[63] Interestingly, nowhere in Ehrman's recent book on Jesus' historicity does he thoroughly argue against the Biblical Jesus, by presenting an argument against miracles, for example; he just asserts that that Jesus did not exist. It seems that I am not the only one to perceive this as effectively a debate among atheists. That is not to say that this stance is necessarily correct because others agree with me, but that it is not for this reason that I am 'fringe'. This book will of course not focus on the implausibility of the Biblical Jesus. That was touched on in my earlier *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God* and will be thoroughly analysed in the forthcoming finale to my sceptical trilogy, which will focus on Jesus' alleged father.[64]

In any case, I have many more reasons for generally avoiding the issue with Christian believers. The second major reason is that in discussing with Christians, it is far more fruitful to dispute over the Biblical Jesus. That is the relevant character. What truly is the point of quibbling over the existence of a character that is of no interest to believers, especially when they can so easily say 'but even most atheists disagree with you'? Some atheists like me find it a fascinating endeavour, but questioning the Historical Jesus has honestly little impact on the greater 'Christian-atheist debate'.[65] While it would obviously be fairly difficult to find a Christian who denies Jesus' historical existence, many atheists assert Jesus' historicity and are just as horrified as believers when atheistic scholars such as myself 'go rogue'. The issue simply is not all that relevant, at present, when it comes to the greater debates about religion.

There is also a practical side to this as questioning Jesus' historicity is not yet mainstream, while questioning the portrayal of the Biblical Jesus is.[66] In other words, it is far easier to focus on the Biblical Jesus when evaluating the merits of various religions and worldviews. Indeed, it is so easy that the atheists may even find allies here from liberal Christians like Bishop Shelby Spong.[67] Though there is obviously great polemical power in starting out with the uncertainty of Jesus' historicity, the Biblical Jesus is already so implausible, that it simply is not necessary for the non-believer to take on such a great burden as arguing that Jesus did not exist at all. I personally find refuting the Biblical Jesus so easy that it would be madness to argue over Jesus' historicity with Christians. I also suspect that the Christian apologist would love to portray the mythicist atheist as fringe, to take attention away from their own usual position of being on the back foot.[68] This is very ironic, since even the most amateurish mythicist's outlandish theories will generally be more probably true than the case presented by the Christian apologist.[69]

The third major reason ties in nicely with our leaving the Biblical Jesus at the door. By excluding believers, we needn't reinvent the wheel. We can freely operate with what apologists will gleefully label our 'naturalistic assumptions'. Of course, most educated atheists do not operate on assumptions of naturalism but merely follow the evidence where it leads. However it should be described, when the debate is limited

to atheists, we need not justify why we find miraculous claims to be implausible. We need not explain why we find the idea of a son of God to be ludicrous. We need not tirelessly explain and re-explain why we so casually dismiss accounts of angels, spirits, demons and gods. We need not be fearful over acknowledging that the Biblical books about Jesus are at least partly fictional. We can quickly dismiss the existence of the Biblical Jesus and the Celestial Jesus and focus our attentions on whether the Historical Jesus existed. And that is precisely what we aim to do in this book.

A related reason is that, as atheists, we should perceive the strongest case for Jesus' historicity as coming from atheists. Christians will no doubt refer to implausible claims and sources we know to be far from reliable. Atheist scholars, however, take on a simpler challenge. It seems reasonable then, that the Jesus they come up with is a far more defensible Jesus, one unburdened by the most implausible of claims, particularly when coming under scrutiny by fellow atheists like myself. Furthermore, atheists would, at least on the surface, have fewer motives to defend Jesus' historicity *and* more reason to oppose it.[70] So this is less about Christians doing a bad job, and more about the expectation that atheistic scholars would do an even better job. As should be clear throughout this book, and my work in general, I am not interested in attacking the weakest cases for claims I reject. I go after the best. I almost want to be proven wrong.[71] That is an intellectually honest approach. And I honestly think that atheists are more likely to provide us with the best case for Jesus. Rightly or wrongly, that is what I think. This is not about 'intellectual bigotry'.

Fifthly, and I am at pains to say this due to the inevitable misquoting that will result, but it should be obvious that most Christians, who are committed to the view that Jesus existed, cannot treat this issue objectively. It is possible, but it would surely be very difficult to seriously and objectively question Jesus' historical existence in one's scholarly work, when personally believing in Jesus as not only real but as the centre of one's universe. For Christians, there is clearly far more at stake – namely, Jesus Christ (pardon the pun). Christians may not want to hear it, but it would be lunacy to expect that they can be completely disinterested

and objective over what ultimately concerns, well, their ‘ultimate concern’.[72]

Christian scholars such as N. T. Wright and William Lane Craig already display such uncritical methodology when it comes to the miracles of Jesus, that we really ought not think that they could maintain an outsider’s perspective when questioning something as mundane – and also fundamental – as Jesus’ very existence. Thankfully, some believing scholars readily accept that they would not necessarily be objective. For example, New Testament scholar Nicholas Perrin admits that Christian beliefs affect his and his colleagues’ work, and aims to, “disabuse readers of the notion that Jesus scholars are scientists wearing white lab coats”.[73] Consider also the frank thoughts of specialist scholar Mark Goodacre:

> It is a task of ancient history and when understood as ancient history, discussion about the historical Jesus should constantly involve the reminder that massive amounts of key data must be missing. It may be that we seldom reflect on this fact because the ideological investment in Jesus affects our historical research on him.
>
> … Perhaps the major influence on Jesus was his grandfather, whose fascination with Daniel 7 informed Jesus’ apocalyptic mindset. Or perhaps it was Rabbi Matia in Capernaum who used to enjoy telling parables drawn from local agriculture. Or perhaps it was that crazy wandering Galilean exorcist Lebbaeus who used to talk about casting out demons by the Spirit of God. The fact is that we just don’t know. We can’t know. Our knowledge about the historical Jesus is always and inevitably partial. If we take the quest of the historical Jesus seriously as an aspect of ancient history, we have to admit that many of the key pieces must be missing.
>
> The problem is that we are in denial. We simply do not want to admit that we do not have all the data we need to paint a complete picture of the historical Jesus. Good scholarship is sometimes born from a desire to fill in the gaps, and informed speculation can be a virtue. But over-confidence born out of an unrealistic expectation of the evidence will make future generations wonder what we were playing at.[74]

One point against my approach here, though it still supports the growing mythicist tide, is the fact that some Christians actually believe that Jesus did not exist, and others see much of the Jesus story as mythical. Thomas Brodie, a Catholic priest, and Edward van der Kaaij, a Protestant pastor, deny Jesus’ historical existence, whilst Shelby Spong is the exemplar of the liberal Christian who denies much of the Gospels’ miraculous claims.[75] Nevertheless, these are not the dominant views held by Christians. Most would not even consider these fine folk to be

Christians.[76] It is also difficult – as well as unnecessary – to seriously discuss this topic with a person who believes in miracles and/or the inerrancy of the Bible. With the Biblical Jesus and his followers (mostly) left at the door, we can now ask this intriguing historical question. Did Jesus exist? We do not ask if it is useful to believe in Jesus Christ, or if we should believe in Jesus Christ, or if it is crazy or harmful to believe in Jesus Christ. We are today not concerned with religious, social, or political questions. We are asking a purely historical question.

Relatively few – at least in the Academy – have dared ask the question, but the times, they are a-changin'. With the constant publishing of books by Robert M. Price, for so long seen as the one genuine New Testament scholar who openly questioned and even denied Jesus' historicity, and the rise of the internet, many atheists, scholars and laypeople alike, have become interested in this issue. There has been little to counter this surge of interest from the scholarly and secular Jesus historicists. Jesus' existence is normally assumed and such scholars rarely feel the need to go out and prove that Jesus certainly existed. Nevertheless, the likes of Maurice Casey (who has since passed away), and Bart Ehrman (who particularly has served the 'atheistic community' quite admirably, primarily by exposing the flawed nature of the Bible) have recently released book-length treatments decisively demonstrating that Jesus most definitely existed.[77] Or so they thought.

I find it quite amusing when my detractors point to the seeming implausibility of mythicists' theories and to apparent errors in my case for Historical Jesus agnosticism, when the justification of agnosticism is already made obvious by consulting the people arguing *for* Jesus' historical certainty. Forget what I have to say. Forget the more aggressive overtures of outright mythicists such as Richard Carrier, Robert M. Price, David Fitzgerald, and Acharya S. Simply peruse the sources for yourself. Do that, and also hear from the historicists how they 'prove' Jesus' existence. If the case *for* Jesus is unconvincing, then agnosticism is already justified. You needn't bother with the various active cases against Jesus' historical existence, many of which honestly sound ridiculous. For your convenience, I condense my years of doing just that into this 400-odd-page book.

The Problem

In the wake of the Enlightenment,[78] Biblical scholars of the First Quest (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) for the Historical Jesus began to apply critical historical methods to the Biblical texts, so that the true Jesus of history (as opposed to the Biblical Jesus) could be discovered. A 'no quest' period supposedly followed, partly due to Albert Schweitzer's scathing critique of scholars' subjective speculations, and Martin Kähler's revelation that – as the sources are the same – it is impossible to separate the Historical Jesus from the Christ of Faith.[79] Ernst Käsemann effectively kick-started the Second Quest (mid-twentieth century) by convincing his fellow scholars that the Gospels could indeed be preserving authentic historical traditions.[80] The so-called, and current, Third Quest (emerging around the latter part of the twentieth century), incorporates novel approaches and emphasises Jesus' Jewishness.[81]

There is a clear problem in the attempt to discover what it is that Jesus really said and did: it assumes that Jesus existed. Rather than starting with a clean slate, it appears that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scholars realised that miraculous claims are untenable, so simply and uncritically assumed that the real Jesus could be found by separating him from the more implausible claims found in the Biblical texts. Ever since the First Quest, Biblical scholars have largely accepted that the Christ of Faith is a mythological character and that the Gospels are generally unreliable. Nevertheless, it was simply *assumed* that there was a Historical Jesus buried underneath the legendary embellishments. The belief in the Historical Jesus is thus a *direct consequence* of the prevailing belief in the Christ of Faith or Biblical/Gospel Jesus. The relevant questions have always been 'What did he do?', and 'What did he say?', but never 'Did he exist?' I think it obvious that the assumption of Jesus' mundane historicity – a privilege not granted to many mythological characters of other religious traditions – simply reflects the respect for Christianity's influence on Western culture and academia.

It is astonishing that just about everything about Jesus is questioned by mainstream secular scholars, except for his very existence; that is *anathema*.[82] It is also interesting to wonder why it is that the admittedly poor sources somehow, almost miraculously, become unquestionable when it is Jesus' benign and very human existence that is queried. While questioning Jesus' historical existence has become a semi-popular pastime, particularly with the rise of the internet, a thorough examination of this topic by the Academy has been wanting. However, since 2012, a number of books and articles written by scholars have emerged, both defending Jesus' historicity, and arguing for Jesus agnosticism or outright Jesus mythicism. Four academics in particular have been at the forefront of this recent discourse.

In early 2012, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman published *Did Jesus Exist?* to address the supposedly false claims of the typically-amateurish mythicists, and to put forth his own comprehensive case for Jesus' historicity.[83] Only weeks later, independent historian Richard Carrier declared his intent to thoroughly examine the question of Jesus' historicity, and explained his sound, probabilistic method in *Proving History*.[84] Later that year, inspired by the efforts of both scholars, and encouraged by some sceptical musings of my Religious Studies colleagues, I argued that Jesus' historical existence is uncertain, via my Master's thesis,[85] and have further published on the topic – via both traditional scholarly and popular channels – since.[86] In early 2014, the now late New Testament scholar Maurice Casey also attempted to defend Jesus' historicity and heavily criticised certain mythicists in *Jesus: Evidence and Argument Or Mythicist Myths?*[87] Mere months later, Richard Carrier followed up the earlier discussion of his method with the comprehensive *On the Historicity of Jesus*.[88] I have since spent copious amounts of time refining my own arguments, and reviewing the work of these other three, and that of their allies.[89]

There are clear implications of this work regarding the beliefs of numerous Christian and Muslim religious adherents. However, there are also serious implications for critical scholarship. If Jesus' historical existence can be reasonably questioned, then the methods employed by the more mainstream and reputable historicists are in need of reviewing.

Biblical scholar Paul N. Anderson describes a Fourth Quest currently being undertaken, which accords more significance to the oft-dismissed Gospel of John.[90] In light of the far more crucial issue of Jesus' existence, which also raises questions as to the insular nature of even critical and secular Biblical Scholarship, I think that this contemporary and 'actual' search for the Historical Jesus should be described as the 'Fourth Quest'. What follows are analyses of the cases made and the methods used by the aforementioned scholars.

In this meta-review we shall first look at the case for the Historical Jesus, as presented by Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey, in their recent books on the matter. With my commentary, it should be obvious that the case for Jesus' existence is bankrupt and agnosticism should already appear reasonable. I shall then provide many more reasons for why questioning Jesus' existence is entirely reasonable, why it should be commonplace, and shall even reveal why some theories positing Jesus' ahistoricity seem more likely than mainstream historicity theories. Finally, we shall turn our attention to the independent historian that may have just landed the killing blow. Richard Carrier's Bayesian defence of Earl Doherty's 'minimal mythicism' hypothesis is the first (and only) to comprehensively compare the plausibility of various historicist and mythicist theories. It just so happens that his analysis indicates Jesus' non-existence.

1. THE CASE FOR HISTORICITY: EHRMAN

A (Mostly) Wonderful Start

The first of the recent scholarly books arguing for Jesus' historicity, Ehrman's *Did Jesus Exist?* acknowledges that the Christ of Faith is a myth, and seeks to demonstrate the reality of the Historical Jesus.[91] Parts II ('The Mythicists' Claims') and III ('Who Was the Historical Jesus?') of the book can mostly be overlooked as they proceed from the assumption of Jesus' historicity.[92] It is in Part I, 'Evidence for the Historical Jesus', where Ehrman's positive case for Jesus' historicity is presented, and that is what is vital. If his case should prove unconvincing, and it is, the rationality – indeed, necessity – of my agnosticism is already assured. Over five chapters, Ehrman acknowledges that the available sources are problematic, somehow finds them useful regarding the Historical Jesus, and curiously appeals to hypothetical sources which supposedly pre-date the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles whilst also providing certainty over Jesus' historical existence.

As is customary among historicists, Ehrman introduces the issue by poisoning the well;[93] by noting that those who doubt the existence of the Historical Jesus tend to be outsiders to the fields of "New Testament or early Christian studies", and also tend to not hold teaching positions.[94] While this is not completely irrelevant, we must consider that this sort of inquiry questions paradigms essential to such fields, so that this should not be a vital factor. It is the best arguments that Jesus sceptics can produce that are truly important, no matter their qualifications or specialisations. To his credit, Ehrman does indicate that the consensus view of the specialist scholars may not in itself be enough:

> I hardly need to stress what I have already intimated: the view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet. That in itself is not *proof*, of course. Expert opinion is, at the end of the day, still opinion. But why would you not want to know what experts have to say?[95]

Indeed, highly-qualified people can be wrong, and ill-qualified people can be right. Ehrman is right that experts need to be respected, but it is the

very foundations and presuppositions of the experts that scholars like myself are questioning. And if something faulty is found, it deserves the inevitable torrent of criticisms that scholars like myself will unleash. I respect the man, and I respect the rest of his work. On this topic, however, his work has failed to impress me, as has his inaccurate and harsh claim that Historical Jesus agnostics and mythicists "have some other agenda that this denial serves."[96] It also seems a somewhat hypocritical tactic, as Ehrman's being a non-Christian effectively also places him on the fringe of New Testament scholarship; it must be recognised that the majority of such scholars are Christian believers, so that many of Ehrman's views about the resurrection, for example, are also 'fringe'. The lone genius in a room full of idiots is also 'fringe'. Ehrman then provides a short history of mythicism, acknowledging that the very sceptical Bruno Bauer was a properly qualified scholar and originally accepted the consensus view.[97]

After subjecting "the Gospel accounts to a careful, detailed, and hypercritical evaluation, Bauer began to think that Jesus was a literary invention of the Gospel writers", which led to his being fired from his post at the German University of Bonn.[98] Perhaps this could address the feigned astonishment of historicists that mythicists tend to be outsiders to the field and/or do not hold teaching positions. There is clearly some incentive for even non-believing scholars to somewhat toe the party line. This, among other considerations, makes me wonder if it is actually *necessary* that those questioning Jesus' historical existence be outsiders to New Testament scholarship.[99] While predictably stressing the amateurish and/or non-specialist nature of notable Jesus sceptics, Ehrman does admit that Richard Carrier and Robert Price are suitably qualified. [100] After effectively acknowledging that the Christ of Faith is mythical, [101] Ehrman begins his case proper by noting some of the problems with the Bible:

> But I don't think the Bible is perfect. Far from it. The Bible is filled with a multitude of voices, and these voices are often at odds with one another, contradicting one another in minute details and in major issues involving such basic views as what God is like, who the people of God are, who Jesus is, how one can be in a right relationship with God, why there is suffering in the world, how we are to behave, and on and on. And I heartily disagree with the views of most biblical authors on one point or another.[102]

He then explains that the historian's task is to establish "what probably happened in the past", and admits that "we cannot prove a single thing historically".[103] Without resorting to mathematical models favoured by Carrier and myself, Ehrman does inadvertently admit that history is *probabilistic*. I stress this to highlight the lack of transparency of Biblical historians and sometimes mainstream historians, when it comes to presenting their hypotheses as true or probably true – very few bother to do any sort of probabilistic analysis.[104] Ehrman then makes an interesting point regarding who bears the burden of proof:

> As my former colleague, E. P. Sanders, an eminent professor of New Testament studies in nearby Duke University, used to say, "The burden of proof belongs with whoever is making the claim." That is, if Price wants to argue that Jesus did not exist, then he bears the burden of proof for his argument. If I want to argue that he did exist, then I do. Fair enough.[105]

I agree with this, but must now wonder why there is no consideration given to a group that is far more nuanced and neutral than the typical Jesus mythicist: the Historical Jesus agnostic (my official position). Ehrman appears to set up a false dichotomy, a black or white scenario, as many Christian believers do in arguing over God's existence and other Christian claims, with no reasonable middle ground. But as an agnostic when it comes to God/Christianity, Ehrman should recognise that the middle ground is usually where the most rational views reside, and would also do well to recognise that the Historical Jesus agnostics should actually be paid far more attention than the sometimes 'extreme' mythicists. His attitude is at odds with his earlier acknowledging that history cannot be proven, and the resulting implication that there must always exist a gray area.

Ehrman then clarifies that historians would prefer numerous, contemporary, detailed, and somewhat disinterested sources, which corroborate others' accounts without collaboration having taking place. [106] Thus far looking like a case against Jesus' historicity, this is effectively a description of precisely what is lacking in the case for Jesus. In what again could be mistaken as a case for Jesus agnosticism, Ehrman then admits that there is no physical evidence for Jesus, no writings from

the great man himself, there are no mentions of him by first-century Greek or Roman authors (we can charitably consider that Josephus was Jewish, as well as a Roman citizen), and agrees that no contemporary and eyewitness accounts are available.[107] Kindly continuing to build my own case for me, Ehrman also makes clear that the Gospel authors are unknown:

> Scholars today, outside the ranks of fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, are virtually unified in thinking that none of these ascriptions of authorship is probably correct. One important point to notice is that none of the Gospel writers ever identifies himself by name or narrates any of his stories about Jesus in the first person. The Gospels are all written anonymously, and the authors describe the disciples, including the disciples Matthew and John, in the third person, talking about what "they" did (not what "I" or "we" did). Even more important, the immediate followers of Jesus were, like him, lower-class Aramaic-speaking peasants from rural Galilee. Could they have written Gospels?[108]

Ehrman then notes some rather unfortunate aspects of the Gospels, considering that he is trying to argue for historical certainty over Jesus' existence (he supposedly lived from 7-2 BCE to 30-33 CE):

> The native tongue of Jesus, his disciples, and most people in Palestine was Aramaic. But the Gospels were written not in Aramaic but Greek. And in very good Greek… Scholars typically date these Greek compositions to the end of the first century, with Mark probably being the first Gospel, written around 70 CE or so; Matthew and Luke being a bit later, possibly 80-85 CE; and John being last, around 90-95 CE. The authors of these books were not the original followers of Jesus or probably even followers of the twelve earthly disciples of Jesus. They were later Christians who had heard stories about Jesus as they circulated by word of mouth year after year and decade after decade and finally decided to write them down.[109]

Focussing on the non-Christian sources that are available, from within around 100 years after Jesus' death,[110] Ehrman generally dismisses the few extant non-Christian and non-Jewish testimonies, that of Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and Tacitus.[111] On Pliny, Ehrman remarks:

> This reference is obviously not much to go on. But it does tell us that there were Christians worshipping someone named Christ in the early second century in the region of Asia Minor... In any event, whatever Pliny knows about Christ he appears to have learned from the Christians who informed him, and so he does not provide us with completely independent testimony that Jesus actually existed, only the testimony of Christians living some eighty years after Jesus would have died.[112]

On Suetonius:

> Even less helpful is a reference found in the writings of the Roman biographer Suetonius… In any event, even if Suetonius is referring to Jesus by a misspelled epithet, he does not help us much in our quest for non-Christian references to Jesus. Jesus himself would have been dead for some twenty years when these riots in Rome took place, so at best Suetonius would be providing evidence, if he can count for evidence, that there were Christians in Rome during the reign of Claudius. But this could have been the case whether Jesus lived or not…[113]

And on Tacitus:

> At the same time, the information is not particularly helpful in establishing that there really lived a man named Jesus. How would Tacitus know what he knew? It is pretty obvious that he had heard of Jesus, but he was writing some eighty-five years after Jesus would have died, and by that time Christians were certainly telling stories of Jesus… It should be clear in any event that Tacitus is basing his comment about Jesus on hearsay rather than, say, detailed historical research… But even more to the point, brief though his comment is, Tacitus is precisely wrong in one thing he says. He calls Pilate the "procurator" of Judea. We now know from the inscription discovered in 1961 at Caesarea that as governor, Pilate had the title and rank, not of procurator (one who dealt principally with revenue collection), but of prefect (one who also had military forces at his commend). This must show that Tacitus did not look up any official record of what happened to Jesus, written at the time of his execution (if in fact such a record existed, which is highly doubtful). He therefore had heard the information.[114]

Bizarrely, while he admits that the Tacitus reference is unhelpful, he inexplicably concludes that "his reference shows that high-ranking Roman officials of the early second century knew that Jesus had lived and had been executed by the governor of Judea."[115] You will simply have to get used to Ehrman's brand of illogical and inconsistent thinking, as it is evident throughout *Did Jesus Exist?* Now with the dearth of sources historians would have preferred, the unhelpful nature of the secular/pagan sources, and with only the paucity of Jewish and Christian documents left to discuss, the case for Jesus' historicity is not looking very promising. Now focussing on the Jewish sources, Ehrman quickly discards the disputed and irrelevant Talmudic references to Jesus, which he arguably should not have even mentioned:

> These Talmudic references to Jesus were written hundreds of years after he would have lived and so are really of very little use for us in our quest… If we want evidence to support the claim that he did in fact once exist, we therefore have to turn to other sources. [116]

That leaves us only with Josephus, the most important external source, after which we are forced to discuss solely Christian sources – which would obviously be very biased. There are two references to Jesus – that is, our Jesus, as Josephus mentioned many Jesuses – in Josephus' works. Ehrman wishes to temporarily overlook the smaller reference (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1) so that he can focus on the larger and most controversial one (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3):

> Mythicists typically argue that this passage was not originally in Josephus but was inserted by later Christian scribes. Before dealing with that claim I should consider the second passage, the one over which there is the most debate. This passage is known to scholars as the *Testimonium Flavianum*…[117]

Unfortunately, with its glowing endorsement of the Biblical Jesus, the larger *Testimonium Flavianum* is perceived – even by Ehrman – as being a forgery:

> Josephus… was thoroughly and ineluctably Jewish and certainly never converted to be a follower of Jesus. But this passage contains comments that only a Christian would make… In the judgement of most scholars, there is simply no way Josephus the Jew would or could have written such things.[118]

Ehrman raises an issue that is typical of the sources for Jesus (I emphasise this point with italics):

> It needs to be remembered that Josephus, by his own admission, was something of a turncoat in the war with Rome. This is how most Jews throughout history have remembered him. Among his own people he was not a beloved author read through the ages. In fact, his *writings were transmitted in the Middle Ages not by Jews but by Christians*. This shows how we can explain the extraordinary Christian claims about Jesus in this passage.[119]

Seemingly in damage control, Ehrman takes out the bits he doesn't like so that a more plausible version of the obviously inaccurate passage remains, which is generally how such scholars approach the Christian sources.[120] It is as if it were *anathema* to imagine that when most of a text is fabricated, including the most important sections, that the whole thing may be fabricated. There is, of course, no way of knowing if such speculative and truncated versions are authentic. After trying to defend the

partial authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum* from mythicists' arguments,[121] Ehrman rightly – though somewhat surprisingly – concedes that the Josephean references to Jesus are inconclusive, as they would be derivative if genuine:

> My main point is that whether the *Testimonium* is authentically from Josephus (in its pared-down form) or not probably does not ultimately matter for the question I am pursuing here. Whether or not Jesus lived has to be decided on other kinds of evidence from this. And here is why. Suppose Josephus really did write the *Testimonium*. That would show that by 93 CE – some sixty or more years after the traditional date of Jesus' death – a Jewish historian of Palestine had some information about him. And where would Josephus have derived this information? He would have heard stories about Jesus that were in circulation… As a result, even though both the mythicists and their opponents like to fight long and hard over the *Testimonium* of Josephus, in fact it is only marginally relevant to the question of whether Jesus existed.[122]

Ehrman also adds that "my case for the historicity of Jesus does not depend on the reliability of Josephus' testimony".[123] Perhaps it is some editing error, but Ehrman's section on Josephus ended without him returning to the other, shorter, reference to Jesus. In any case, it would be subject to the same problem Ehrman just highlighted, and I later argue that it is probably inauthentic, especially if the *Testimonium Flavianum* is a forgery. Ehrman has been very bold – though mostly fair – so far. He has effectively ruled out the sources that we objective and secular scholars might place more confidence in, so that he has no choice but to 'go all in' with the evangelistic Christian sources that we would no doubt be very sceptical about.[124] They are the only cards he has left in the game. In any case, Ehrman has started his investigation brilliantly and critically. This has been worthy of the opening chapters of a book that denied or doubted Jesus' existence. Would that he would have stopped there!

Unfortunately, Ehrman moves on to critique the Christian sources. This is where it all goes wrong, in the sense that Ehrman mysteriously loses his ability to think logically and critically, though he still finds time to bash the Gospels, which he gleefully does whenever he isn't dogmatically asserting that Jesus must have existed. Assuring readers that "the Gospels, their sources, and the oral traditions that lie behind them combine to make a convincing case that Jesus really existed", he initially concedes that the Gospels "are filled with nonhistorical material, accounts of events that

could not have happened" and numerous "discrepancies and contradictions".[125] Ehrman further admits that the authors are biased, which ought to have him questioning their intentions with much scrutiny, particularly given their unknown identities and capabilities, and acknowledges that we do not have access to the original texts.[126] He also recognises that the scant sources make it very difficult to know in detail, what Jesus "actually said, did, and experienced".[127] Ehrman is even more critical in an earlier book, seemingly presenting a case for agnosticism:

> What sorts of things do pagan authors from the time of Jesus have to say about him? Nothing. As odd as it may seem, there is no mention of Jesus at all by any of his pagan contemporaries. There are no birth records, no trial transcripts, no death certificates; there are no expressions of interest, no heated slanders, no passing references – nothing. In fact, if we broaden our field of concern to the years after his death – even if we include the entire first century of the Common Era – there is not so much as a solitary reference to Jesus in any non-Christian, non-Jewish source of any kind. I should stress that we do have a large number of documents from the time – the writings of poets, philosophers, historians, scientists, and government officials, for example, not to mention the large collection of surviving inscriptions on stone and private letters and legal documents on papyrus. In none of this vast array of surviving writings is Jesus' name ever so much as mentioned.[128]

So far, so good. Given his seemingly low opinion of the state of the sources, let us now take a look at how Ehrman uses them to prove that Jesus existed.

Madness: The Gospels and the Folly of the Hypothetical Source

Extremely disappointing given the positive start, Ehrman's case for Jesus' historicity is rapidly degraded. Ehrman's, and anybody else's, case for Jesus essentially revolves around the canonical Gospels, the four gospels found in the New Testament Bible. He does, however, briefly consider some non-canonical Christian writings. He generally dismisses them as being too late and legendary, but shows respect to the Gospel of Thomas (date unknown, and it is primarily a sayings document anyway – sayings that could have originated with anyone), and, bizarrely, the Gospel of Peter and the Papyrus Egerton 2, which are often thought of (it is disputed) as being mid to late second century texts.[129] He later mentions the Gospels of Thomas and Peter again, admitting that "It cannot be determined with absolute certainty" whether they also "go back to written sources", and gives no reason for us to accept them (or their hypothesised foundational sources) as reliable sources of historical information.[130] Why Ehrman somewhat values such sources shall soon be made clear. Let us first deal with the canonical Gospels.

Now begins the challenge of using the canonical Gospels to establish the certainty of Jesus' historical existence. These are the very same documents Ehrman discredits on an almost daily basis. One reason Ehrman finds the Gospels reliable enough on this particular issue is the mere assumption that the authors somewhat intended to relay historical information.[131] For example:

> The authors were real, living, breathing, historical persons; they had heard reports about Jesus; they had probably read earlier accounts of his life; and they decided to write their own versions.[132]

This is not comprehensively argued for; it is just taken for granted (I shall argue against it later). It seems unfair that Ehrman and his fellow historicists can speculate as to the intentions of New Testament authors in this way, while mythicists are not allowed to. I frequently see such

inequitable conduct with my work in the Philosophy of Religion, where Christian apologists are somehow allowed to appeal to mere possibilities, while we secular critics are expected to argue from certainty. Not only is this an untenable double standard, but also it should be the other way around, as agnostics clearly need not shoulder the burden of proof. It is disappointing to see a respectable and secular scholar such as Bart Ehrman resorting to such an inconsistent approach when it comes to speculating on authorial intent. An example:

> One of the real weaknesses of Well's argument is that he assumes that we know what Paul *would* have done. Second-guessing someone is always a dangerous historical enterprise, especially second-guessing someone from two thousand years ago whom we don't really know and have limited access to. What real evidence do we have to suggest what Paul would have done?[133]

Another reason Ehrman trusts the Gospels as historically reliable relates to the credibility afforded by "multiple sources that corroborate one another's stories without having collaborated".[134] This is nonsense and he knows it. Every scholar of the New Testament knows it. The sources we actually have are not independent, with each one following and partly deriving from the other. On the very same page, Ehrman acknowledges that Mark is the earliest Gospel, and that Matthew and Luke relied on it.[135] He resolves this seeming contradiction by referring to the unique material found in each of the latter Synoptic Gospels, so that the independent corroboration is provided by hypothetical or *imaginary* sources,[136] overlooking the possibilities that Luke knew Matthew, for example, and is thus not independent on that way either, or that each author simply added original and nonhistorical information to suit their own ends (we already agree that they were biased); he then delights in the "wealth" of "independent accounts".[137]

This, despite Ehrman acknowledging that the Gospel authors and the posited authors behind them could indeed have "made it up". He says quite clearly, "So where did the story come from? It seems most likely that Luke, or his source, simply made it up…"[138] It has always bemused me that scholars like Ehrman are far too trigger-happy in declaring a new source every time they find a passage not mentioned in earlier texts. If Ockham's Razor means anything, it is simpler to suppose that Matthew

simply added her own original material to Mark,[139] and Luke added his own original material to Mark's and Matthew's writings. There is simply no need to posit a Q source to explain material common to Matthew and Luke, or M and L sources to explain material in Matthew and Luke that is not found elsewhere.[140] And of course, much of the later Gospels, particularly Matthew, obviously stems from the Old Testament. Hence the many 'fulfilled' prophecies. The more we recognise this to be the case, the less room there is to reasonably posit Ehrman's imaginary sources.

Indeed, it is surely the simpler and more preferable theory to suppose that one existing source influenced the next, than to posit a whole host of sources whose very existence cannot be verified. Another possibility is that Q is really a longer version of Mark. In any case, we might wonder why such important and obviously respected sources were not preserved.[141] Still, even if we grant that these sources actually existed, it is the *reliability* of these highly questionable sources that still needs to be established, and that is where Ehrman's creativity really shines.

> What is sometimes underappreciated by mythicists who want to discount the value of the Gospels for establishing the historical existence of Jesus is that our surviving accounts, which began to be written some forty years after the traditional date of Jesus' death, were based on earlier written sources that no longer survive. But they obviously did exist at one time, and they just as obviously had to predate the Gospels that we now have.[142]

They are apparently early, which still doesn't resolve all our questions. It is wonderful that this is all so obvious that no convincing argument needs to be put forth, and it is just as wonderful that 'predate' could possibly[143] mean 'by decades' and not, say, 'by months'. It seems that it could be just as obvious that unique material is simply made up, as later authors adapt the existing story to suit their community's needs. It is not even clear why he just assumes that such sources must be 'historically authentic', when he is well aware that the ancients often saw their stories as 'true' without accurately describing what actually happened; that they intended to convey mystical truths.[144] Nevertheless, Ehrman is supremely confident of the general veracity or truthfulness of the Gospels because of the 'numerous' non-existing written sources behind them, such as Q, M, and L.[145] Ehrman's sparse examples for his positing of the M source are truly bizarre:

> Matthew as well is based on written sources. As pointed out, he used Mark, even more than Luke did, and Q. But he too includes many stories found only in his Gospel: the visit of the wise men to worship the infant Jesus, for example, and the parable of the sheep and the goats at the last judgment. These then must have come from Matthew's special source(s), which scholars have labeled *M*. Like L, M may have been a single written document, a number of documents, or a combination of oral traditions and written sources. [146]

Ehrman's first example is part of the infancy myths about Jesus that are rightly discredited by secular scholars. After all, they contain many supernatural tales, and more mundane but still implausible stories as well. Indeed, even in his public discourse, Ehrman is quite happy to discuss the many problems with both the supernatural and mundane aspects of the Gospels' descriptions of Jesus' early life:

> For centuries scholars have recognized that the birth narratives of the New Testament are historically problematic. For one thing, the two accounts—the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke—are strikingly different from one another, in ways that appear irreconcilable. To start with, they both give genealogies of Jesus' father, Joseph (it's an interesting question why they do so, since in neither account is Jesus a blood relative of Joseph), but they are different genealogies: he is said to have a different father, and grandfather, and great-grandfather, and so on. It is not that one is a genealogy of Mary and the other of Joseph. Both Gospel authors are crystal clear: they are giving Joseph's genealogy. And they are doing so because they both want to relate Jesus to the ancestral line of the Jewish patriarchs, but neither of them has access to the kind of reliable data they need for the task. So they have provided genealogies that have been invented for the purpose and that, as a result, are necessarily at odds with each other. And that is just the opening gambit. The discrepancies occur repeatedly throughout the chapters.
>
> Moreover, both accounts contain contradictions with the known facts of history. Just take Luke as an example. Only in this Gospel do Joseph and Mary make a trip from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register for a census when "the whole world" had to be enrolled under Caesar Augustus. The whole world? Luke must mean "the whole Roman Empire." But even that cannot be right, historically. We have good documentation about the reign of Caesar Augustus, and there never was a census of his entire empire. Let alone one in which people had to register in their ancestral home. In this account Joseph and Mary need to register in Bethlehem (which is why Jesus is born there) because Joseph is descended from King David, who came from Bethlehem. But David lived a thousand years earlier. Is everyone in the entire Roman Empire returning to their ancestral home from a thousand years earlier? Imagine the massive migrations for this census. And no historian from the time thought it was worth mentioning? This is not a story based on historical fact. It is a narrative designed to show how Jesus could have been born in Bethlehem—whence the Messiah was to come—when everyone knew in fact that he came from Nazareth.

> There are other kinds of implausibility in the accounts—leaving aside the much-debated question of the virgin birth itself. In Matthew, for example, the wise men follow the star to Bethlehem, where it stops over the house where Jesus is (why, by the way, is Jesus' family living in a house, if they just came to register for a census?). How is it that a star—or any celestial body—can lead anyone to a particular town? And how can it then stop over a particular house?
>
> Conundrums such as these have been debated for many years, of course, with some Christian scholars and their lay followers finding ingenious solutions to them and more critical historians insisting that in fact they are bona fide problems that show that these Gospel sources, whatever else they are, are not historically reliable descriptions of what really happened when Jesus was born.
>
> Many Christians take offense at that claim, but in fact it need not be that way, as many less literally minded believers have long known and said. The accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament have never been called "histories"; instead, they have always been known as "Gospels"—that is "proclamations of the good news." These are books that meant to declare religious truths, not historical facts.[147]

So what exactly is Ehrman's aim? To reveal the folly of his own method? He argues for these hypothetical foundational sources, as if they somehow rescue the case for the Historical Jesus' existence (but miraculously not for the Biblical Jesus), and yet they can easily be shown to contain fictions.

The treasured Sermon on the Mount also gives us an example of a) a mundane event in the Gospels that is considered inauthentic and b) a mundane event in a hypothetical foundational source that is considered inauthentic. While considering the sermon's delivery by Jesus unlikely, [148] Ehrman thinks the material comes from Q, though it could just as easily come from M, some other hypothetical source, or Matthew.[149] Ehrman also stated earlier (emphasis mine):

> Luke inherited oral traditions about Jesus and his connection with Nazareth, and he recorded what he heard. What he heard *may have been right or it may have been wrong*… [150]
>
> The Gospel writers – anonymous Greek-speaking Christians living thirty-five to sixty-five years after the traditional date of Jesus' death – were simply writing down episodes that they had heard from the life of Jesus. *Some of these episodes may be historically accurate, others may not be*.[151]

May be? May not be? That sounds like agnosticism. It certainly doesn't sound like someone that earlier accepted the burden of proof and that speaks with such certainty over Jesus' existence. It seems that at some level, Ehrman does realise that he has no way of verifying the contents of his non-existing sources, despite this approach being the cornerstone of his entire case! His second example is only a parable. What is Ehrman's point here? That M (and other hypothetical foundational sources) contains fictions just like the Gospels do, or that it contains teachings and parables that could have originated with anyone?

He actually later acknowledges that "many, many other things were attributed to Jesus that he probably did not say (for example, many of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas and later Gospels)".[152] This is supposed to help Ehrman's case for Jesus' historicity? It is astounding that the case for the reliability of the largely fictional Gospels relies on hypothetical sources, which themselves seem to be full of fictions, both natural and supernatural.[153] Not only are these hypothetical sources full of fictions, to the extent that Ehrman himself is unsure if they are veridical, but he acknowledges that – as usual – scholars have disagreements about them:

> Again, I do not mean to say that every scholar agrees on every detail. On the contrary, scholars vigorously debate many specific issues.[154]

The scholars are unsure about the content of these non-existing sources, and rightly so. We thus are faced with the same problem. How do we trust these sources that are full of fictions? How do we know they are not entirely fictional? Is it because they too, must have hypothetical foundational sources underlying them that are 'obviously authentic'? Consider also, that while Ehrman, in what is effectively an appeal to ignorance,[155] posits imaginary sources for Matthew and Luke, there is at least one actual source we can confirm, namely Mark, and that it is plagued by fabrications and other problems. It seems ridiculous to speak with such certainty and reverence concerning hypothetical influences for Matthew and Luke, when the actual influences (such as Mark and the Old Testament [fairly uncontroversial], or Pagan writings [fairly

controversial]) are overlooked and so easily dismissed by objective historians as being reliable sources of historical truths.

This is all just utter madness; scholars of other fields should not stand for it. It makes an absolute mockery of historical research. I do not wish to be adversarial, but such use of non-existing sources is completely unscholarly and deserves to be thoroughly ridiculed. Also, if such tales and parables are simply 'made up', there is no good reason that it cannot have been Matthew (and the other Gospel authors) who made them up. Scholars need not posit one, or "a number of" non-existing sources. Indeed, that introduces unnecessary complexities, which is generally a sign of poor methodology and poor scholarship. Ehrman himself seems to allude to the possibility that M and L may not exist, as the material unique to Matthew and Luke may 'also' derive from Q, with the various authors simply deciding to incorporate different portions (emphasis mine):

> It would have been possible for example, for Matthew to copy some of the stories of the Passion from Q and for Luke not to include those stories. If so, *we would have no way of knowing* whether the stories found only in Matthew – including some of the passages in the passion narrative – were in fact Q stories that Luke simply decided not to reproduce for reasons of his own.[156]

Just as how both authors don't include everything from Mark's gospel. This is not to say that I believe Q existed, which I do not, but to reveal that it is unnecessary to posit the existence of M and L hypothetical sources. Now not only is the existence of such hypothetical (i.e. currently not – if ever – existing) sources disputed, Ehrman does not give any logically coherent reasons for why these sources should be trusted. To the contrary, he just gave us major reasons to distrust them and revealed that even he may not be so confident in them! Like the Gospels they supposedly influenced, they are anonymous and contain many fictions (unsurprisingly).[157] Nothing substantial is said of their authors, authorial intent, composition dates, genre or authenticity. Surely these factors are of the utmost importance. But you need not take my word for it.

Those that have shaped History as an academic discipline agree that determining the usefulness of even the much-desired primary sources

necessitates that we consider the age, locale, author, influences, credibility and whether changes have been made.[158] Further considerations for secondary sources obviously include the identification of the sources behind them, and what parts of these primary testimonies were reported accurately.[159] While much of this is often unknown when it comes to the sources we actually have, seemingly justifying some level of agnosticism, Ehrman certainly does not factor all this in when it comes to his legions of non-existing sources. This is History 101, and Ehrman has failed, as have his like-minded colleagues. (Note that I have cited influential historians here, whilst Ehrman offers no mainstream historical support for his imaginary source approach, despite asserting that "The writing of history should be done by following strict historical protocols.") [160] They are not doing history. They have crafted their own – spurious – methods, born out of necessity due to the poor state of the available sources, and they simply make assertions without any evidence or logic to back them up. For example:

> … they all corroborate many of the key things said of Jesus in the Gospels; and most important they are all independent of one another... The view that Jesus existed is found in multiple independent sources that must have been circulating throughout various regions of the Roman Empire in the decades before the Gospels that survive were produced.[161]

Regarding Ehrman's first point, it is certainly no miracle that a piece cut out of document A would agree with document A. It is distressing that these scholars are unable to grasp simple logical concepts. And this is basically no different to the absurdly fallacious bracketing method used by apologists in arguing for the veridicality of the Bibles' miraculous claims. [162] Such apologists remove the supernatural/implausible claims from the text, then claim that the rest, which is somehow assumed to be true, only makes sense if we put the excised portions back in. Obviously! That could be true of any fictional story. Ehrman's latter points are made without any validation. His "must have been" 'argument' seems about equivalent to the schoolyard justification, "just because". Just as independence cannot be established with the sources that actually exist, the non-existing sources can also not be determined as being independent. That is, if they even existed. It sounds bizarre even speaking this way about sources that we are not sure existed at all.

Putting the sound methods of historians and logicians aside, I think appealing to common sense could here be useful. How confident can you possibly be in sources that you don't even know existed? How can you know that they are trustworthy when you do not know the authors, their character, their intent, their track record, and their qualifications?[163] How can you know them to accurately report events when you are unsure if the authors are eyewitnesses, and confusion persists as to their temporal distance from the events? Can you be sure of the content, and context? How can such sources add to the credibility of existing sources that are already revealed to be highly questionable? How much faith do you need to suppose that these sources intend to portray objective histories, rather than enlightening allegories, or entertaining fictions? How can you be certain that these non-existing sources confirm your views about Jesus, rather than the views of a mythicist like Earl Doherty?

In other words, it is possible that the very earliest sources, which no longer exist, confirm that Jesus did not exist as a human on Earth – we could label such a source as *Ephemeris de Paulus*.[164] According to this source, which predates Paul's extant writings, Paul is ignorant about a Historical Jesus and is experiencing visions of the celestial Son of Man he already believes in, as an apocalypticist Jew. In this hypothetical source, the links to the intertestamental literature are even more obvious, and there are hints that Paul is suffering from mental illness. I just made this source up, of course, but that is the point.[165] That Ehrman somehow 'knows' that made up sources support his views is bewildering. This seems more like the musings of a fundamentalist believer rather than a critical scholar.

Just why do these foundational sources have to be ones that no longer exist (if ever) and that happen to align perfectly with the views of Ehrman and his fellow Jesus historicists? Why couldn't they describe a purely supernatural Jesus? Why couldn't they outline how Paul or Mark admitted to inventing Jesus? Isn't this just a little too convenient? And why can't these hypothetical foundations be, or derive from, *actual* sources that still *exist*, such as the writings of Paul, the work of Philo of Alexandria,[166] the Old Testament, the Jewish intertestamental literature, Greek philosophy and poetry (Homer's Iliad?), and (gasp!) the mythologies of far

earlier religious traditions? Which, in a fair and probabilistic analysis, would be more likely? That the sources underlying the Gospels are those that we can't even be sure existed, and just happen to suit historicists' desires perfectly, or sources that we know existed, many of which are actually obvious influences on the New Testament?[167]

But of course, if we could explain almost every passage in the Gospel of Mark as originating in earlier and actual sources like Paul's letters, the books of the Old Testament (don't worry, we will get to that), and perhaps pagan sources, then it makes it supremely difficult to assert that Mark is truly writing about a person that really lived, several decades ago – so it is understandable, whilst also horrifying, that the historicists do what they do. These observations cannot be stressed enough. Not only is it outrageous to posit hypothetical foundational sources that do not exist and cannot be scrutinised, and to assume that they confirm all one's thoughts about Jesus, but such activity undermines the far more reasonable and arguably more fruitful approach in seeking influences from actual sources that we know exist and that can be scrutinised. (The problem here of course, for those not prepared to do away with their presuppositions, is that these existing sources indicate radically different Christian origins).

It is also quite disturbing that Ehrman seems so comfortable with the Gospels (and the Epistles) when they do not mention their sources (apart from, effectively, God), and the fact that the sources and tradents underlying his imaginary documents and oral traditions cannot be identified, and the fact that he himself appeals to imaginary sources for his certainty over Jesus' existence without any references to mainstream historians who endorse his ridiculous method. This is also an ironic development, since it is the very lack of sources that leads to so much disagreement about Jesus, and even the notion that he might not have existed at all.

Of course, scholars should generally be suspicious of such methodology, like Robert Miller, who recognises that "questions about the existence, extent, and reliability of earlier sources in the Gospels of Peter and Mark are all contested".[168] None of this seems to faze Ehrman, though he, in yet another revelation of his contradictory and hypocritical

double standard, finds it abhorrent when Jesus sceptics fail to identify *their* sources. It is truly sad that he criticises certain mythicists for their errors, then commits the same errors himself, to the extent that these errors form the very foundations of his case.

> [Kersey] Graves does not provide a single piece of documentation for any of them. They are all asserted, on his own authority… Graves does not name the sources of his information… in almost every instance the claims are unsubstantiated… There is no evidence. This is made up.[169]

This comment comes from a section of Ehrman's book that deals with the dreaded 'pagan parallels', where aspects of the Jesus story are compared with elements of the stories of earlier mythological figures, which we shall explore more substantially later on. Note how Ehrman says "almost every instance" and not "every instance". There are indeed some valid parallels, particularly with dying and rising gods, even though some mythicists might make too much of it. Interestingly, Ehrman also makes his contradictory privileging of the Gospels and his imaginary sources very obvious: "the evidence for such [dying and rising] gods is at best sparse, scattered, and ambiguous, not abundant, ubiquitous, and clear."[170] We can only chuckle. Simply replace 'such gods' with 'the Historical Jesus'.

As for his ill-advised "This is made up" comment, maybe the New Testament's claims and Ehrman's claims are similarly "made up". It should be concerning to you, dear reader, that the case for Jesus' historicity is so flimsy that even the most prestigious and respected of proponents need to create the sources they would like to have, while simultaneously ignoring the sources that they actually have. They commit the same crime when it comes to logical reasoning and methodology, which we shall discuss in detail later on. We must accept the possibility that these alleged foundational sources could be works of fiction (midrashic allegories/parables perhaps).

Religions stemming from fictions are commonplace and even religions that arise out of *obvious* fictions are not unheard of.[171] Surely, then, we must seriously consider the possibility that later Christians may have misunderstood a purely allegorical tale composed by Mark. None of this

seems to interest this Biblical historian, perhaps due to the sheer number of non-existent sources. After all, “No one knows how many there actually were”.[172] There could be millions of them, known through the admittedly “scant literary remains that survive”,[173] truly making the Historical Jesus the best-attested figure of history! This would be ironic, as the Historical Jesus is generally believed by secular historicists to have been quite insignificant during his lifetime, and poorly attested.[174] Indeed, that assumption is key to explaining why there are no primary sources for the Historical Jesus.

As I earlier hyperbolically imagined, Ehrman, unsatisfied with his first-order non-existing sources, creates second-order non-existing sources. He truly takes this farce to the next level. Rather than (again) acknowledging that the content of the hypothetical written sources could be material unique to those authors, he actually does suppose that these innumerable hypothetical written sources must also stem from yet earlier oral traditions.[175] Ehrman even bizarrely solves a problem of (literally) his own making, when he maintains that these oral traditions must have existed, “Otherwise it is impossible to explain all the written sources that emerged in the middle and end of the first century.” [176] And now we face the same issues all over again, relating to historical accuracy, reliability of transmission, authorship, and so forth. We can keep positing earlier and earlier hypothetical foundational sources until we virtually end up with a rather unsophisticated: “Jesus said that he existed. Therefore he existed.”[177] Strangely enough, though Ehrman relies so much on these hypothetical oral sources, he (again) somewhat acknowledges their possible unreliability:

> So far as I know, there are no longer any form critics among us who agree with the precise formulations of Schmidt, Dibelius, and Bultmann, the pioneers in the field. But the most basic idea behind their approach is still widely shared, namely, that before the Gospels came to be written, and before the sources that lie behind the Gospels were themselves produced, oral traditions about Jesus circulated, and as the stories about Jesus were told and retold, they changed their form and some stories came to be made up.[178]

I simply cannot find enough negative superlatives in all the thesauruses in all the libraries in all the world to describe the complete and utter ridiculousness and bankruptcy of Ehrman’s approach: *The*

generally unreliable, untrustworthy, and fiction-filled Gospels can occasionally be considered excellent sources of objective and accurate historical information because of their foundational written sources, which do not exist, which contained many fictions if they did, and which cannot now be scrutinised for authorship, age, genre, intent, and so forth. These hypothetical written sources are themselves based on oral traditions, that also cannot be scrutinised, that changed over time, and that may well have been made up whole cloth. Therefore we have conclusive proof that Jesus definitely existed. This is enough to make supremely logical analytic philosophers suffer aneurisms. In what universe can this be considered good history, and good scholarship?

Just as with Ehrman's exaggerations over the number of hypothetical written sources that must have existed, we may as well say that there were billions of these oral sources floating about. Some of them may not have even been about Jesus! No one can refute this and people apparently should just trust the scholarly consensus, so we might as well. Also, it apparently matters not that it is possible that what we have in the extant Gospels comes only from the stories that were "made up". We may as well also overlook the unpleasant fact that Matthew and Luke copy Mark to such a great extent that it is borderline miraculous that they did not diverge more, given the availability of all the sources that once "obviously did exist".

It is as if Matthew and Luke knew nothing of Jesus' time on Earth until they encountered Mark's gospel, and had no access to other reliable historical sources. Interestingly, in arguing for the existence of these oral traditions, Ehrman assumes basic facts about Jesus' life (such as the approximate time of his ministry and death), which are only known via the Gospels, which apparently stem from these oral traditions; another clear instance of circular reasoning.[179] And these are, of course, the very same Gospels who we atheists know to be grossly unreliable thanks to the work of many fine scholars. Like Bart Ehrman.[180]

Thankfully, Ehrman attempts to allay our inevitable critical concerns over his reliance on imaginary and speculative sources by simply asserting: "This is not pure speculation".[181] Thank Christ for that! I jest,

of course. What Ehrman has offered thus far has been *nothing but* pure speculation. He simply stated that these sources existed, without a smidgen of evidence, and bizarrely assumed them to be reliable, and supportive of his views, without any analysis whatsoever. That latter part even sounds absurd to contemplate. How exactly does one even begin to thoroughly analyse a source that does not exist?

As for these apparently malleable hypothetical sources confirming one's views, Ehrman farcically plays off the hypothetical source for the problematic (for historicists) Philippians hymn (2:6-11),[182] which apparently reveals that Jesus was initially some sort of divine being, against his hypothetical Gospel/Acts sources,[183] which apparently reveal that Jesus was initially just a 'mere' human, granting preference to the latter, despite the former being part of the earlier extant document.[184] And historicists have the gall to accuse mythicists of twisting the evidence! Not only does Ehrman reprimand like-minded scholars who also dare to appeal to imaginary sources, he also outrageously plays off his own imaginary sources against each other, which, additionally, effectively admits that hypothetical sources may not, in fact, confirm one's view.[185] Incompetence layered upon incompetence; oh, how the lofty have fallen.

These hypothetical sources could instead confirm the differing views of Ehrman's most like-minded scholarly rivals (fellow secular historicists, like Burton Mack), Christians (like Gary Habermas), or even the dreaded mythicists who think that the earliest Christians believed in a purely celestial Jesus (like Earl Doherty). And according to proper and competent historians who do their jobs adequately, sources *do* need to be scrutinised, and no influential mainstream historian has ever granted a free pass to non-existing sources, unlike Ehrman and his fellow Biblical scholars. Ehrman continues his "not pure speculation" by making the claim that some of the oral traditions had Aramaic origins.[186]

Even if correct, it is unclear how this is supposed to aid Ehrman's case, unless he expects that competent historians and laypeople alike will uncritically accept that Jesus and his earliest followers were somehow the only Aramaic-speakers of the time. Perhaps he hoped that readers would overlook the fact that Aramaic was a/the common language of the

Palestinian Jews, Syrians, and others of the era. It is as if Ehrman and his fellow historicists do not feel beholden to the laws of logic. Towards the end of his 'analysis' of the Gospels, Ehrman makes the relatively reserved claim that some of these alleged Aramaic oral traditions about Jesus stemmed "from within a few years of the traditional date of his death".[187]

Surely he could just as easily have claimed that some of these sources originated during Jesus' life (hence scholars now do have access to contemporary sources), and even from the mouth of Jesus himself (perhaps the holy grail of primary sources). It is understandable why he avoids doing so; such claims would probably make it even more obvious that Ehrman is potentially being overly creative, and offering nothing but "pure speculation". He arguably does just this, when he claims that "[the oral traditions] almost certainly started even earlier", but – with Ehrman desperately needing some reprieve at this stage – I'll give him the benefit of the doubt.[188]

Ehrman concludes his crucial discussion of the Gospels by claiming that "there is yet more evidence", but having the hypothetical sources behind the Gospels "makes it almost certain that whatever one wants to say about Jesus, at the very least one must say that he existed."[189] This highlights an oddity in Historical Jesus research. If just about anything about Jesus can be questioned and doubted, why can we not question and doubt his existence? Ehrman fails to reference a single credible historian from outside his field that endorses this fondness for imagining the desired sources into existence, and his belief that they somehow give credibility to the problematic sources that are extant, as well as total certainty over Jesus' historical existence.

As would be expected, not a single credible historian 'outside' of Biblical scholarship relies so uncritically on hypothetical sources. In my own extensive research on the matter, I have not encountered even one historiographical textbook that endorses the proclamation of certainty derived from imaginary sources. Like Ehrman's imaginary documents and oral traditions, such a textbook simply doesn't exist. Historians might hypothesise about such sources, but they certainly would not dare to come

to the conclusions of certainty that Ehrman so casually and flippantly does. They certainly do not claim that we definitely know that *xxx* existed or that *yyy* happened because there are some pretty questionable imaginary sources that say so.

Historians from outside the field of Historical Jesus research have indeed posited hypothetical sources, but certainly not to this extent. For example, not one of them argues that the hypothetical *Hermocrates* proves the historical existence of Plato, or that the non-extant *Enmann's Kaisergeschichte* gives us certainty in authenticating the deeds and sayings of Emperor Augustus. If all problematic historical sources were deemed reliable by appealing to hypothetical foundational ones, which could be used to justify any position or hypothesis, the entire discipline of History would lose all credibility, and would effectively be worthless. The field would be plunged into utter chaos, with scholars able to claim fictions as histories and histories as fictions.

Consider the case for establishing Julius Caesar's existence.[190] No competent scholar can be cited as saying that we know this because of millions and billions of non-existing sources. We have Caesar's own writings. We have contemporary accounts from his supporters and detractors. We have statues of Caesar, modelled on him while he was alive. We have contemporary numismatic evidence; coins from his lifetime with his face on them. No wonder Julius Caesar historicists don't feel the need to fabricate the sources they don't have, or to employ other spurious, illogical, and idiosyncratic methods. They have plenty of actual evidence to work with.[191]

Some critics might point to the documentary hypothesis, so entrenched in Old Testament scholarship, as support for appealing to hypothetical sources.[192] That is (while still in a Biblical field) a completely different scenario. With the Gospels and the question of Jesus' historicity, hypothetical sources are supposed to have been used by the likes of 'Mark' and 'Matthew', and apparently allow us to be certain over Jesus' historical existence. Regarding the documentary hypothesis, the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament, traditionally written by Moses, who we now suspect to be a wholly fictional character – is said to have been written by

numerous authors at different times, and subject to numerous edits and revisions; this is used not to authenticate its contents, but to disparage them!

As this appeal to, and uncritical use, of imaginary sources is obviously so rare in scholarship, it does not even have a label; so allow me.[193] For brevity's sake, I shall dub this monstrosity of method, *Ehrman's law*.[194] The law states that if your preferred theory is not well aligned to the available evidence, you may simply invent as much evidence as is required, and you may further proclaim the unquestionable reliability of your imagined sources. The law also requires you to make grand claims about how this new evidence supports your – and only your – theories and to ridicule others who try to do likewise. Given that even contemporary sources by known authors who do intend to write history are scrutinised, specialist scholars' appeal to Ehrman's law is downright preposterous. Unfortunately, Christian scholars like Richard Burridge and James Dunn are all too happy to agree with Ehrman's disturbing 'method' in appealing to imaginary sources.[195] Noted apologist William Lane Craig also enthusiastically appeals to them, in his case for Jesus' resurrection:

> But that's not all! For further independent testimony to Jesus' burial by Joseph is also found in the sources behind Matthew and Luke and the Gospel of John, not to mention the extra-biblical *Gospel of Peter*. The differences between Mark's account and those of Matthew and Luke suggest that the latter had sources other than Mark alone. These differences are not plausibly explained as Matthew and Luke's editorial changes of Mark because of their sporadic and uneven nature, the inexplicable omission of events like Pilate's interrogation of the centurion, and the agreements in wording between Mathew and Luke in contrast to Mark.[196]

Many of Craig's philosophical and Christian colleagues, such as the influential Richard Swinburne, do the same.[197] So perhaps Ehrman, just as with the Criteria, overlooks that this approach can just as easily be used by evangelical Christian scholars who wish to argue for the incredibly implausible Christ of Faith. Of course, this is not unexpected from apologists who have every reason to forego sound and objective reasoning. But the same could even be said of atheistic New Testament experts, given that their jobs virtually rely on Jesus having existed historically.[198] That various scholars holding such diverse opinions about Jesus can appeal to Ehrman's law must surely reveal how unfruitful it is.

I liken this to my work on the philosophical arguments for God's existence. Once the supernatural is appealed to, we cannot determine prior probabilities, and any supernatural explanation will suffice. In other words, maybe some other god/s explains the evidence just as well as *your* god/s. Similarly, if we appeal to imaginary sources, any old imaginary source will do. In this way, mythicists and conservative Christians can also 'be right'. With such illogical methods, anything goes. I also feel compelled to draw attention to other inconsistencies of Ehrman's imagined sources approach, which he eventually, moving on from the Gospels, extends to his discussion of the Epistles. In trying to defend Philippians 2:6-11 from mythicists, who often see the passage as proof that Jesus was very early on portrayed similarly to dying and rising pagan deities, Ehrman just about identifies another hypothetical source:

> There is wide agreement that the passage appears to be poetic – possibly some kind of hymn (this is what everyone used to think) or a creed (this more plausible) – and that Paul appears to be quoting it rather than composing it.[199]

In a rare show of intellectual honesty, Ehrman admits:

> But even this is debated, as scholars dispute whether it was written by someone else before Paul drafted this letter to the Christians in Philippi or whether Paul himself was its author.[200]

Of course, all unique material in the sources could be inventions of the authors and need not originate in hypothetical foundational documents and oral traditions. Now not only is Ehrman's frequent hypothesising of sources he would *like* to have access to woefully inadequate historical methodology, but he also shows his inconsistency, and his privileging of the Gospels, by later deriding such an approach if applied to other sources, such as the Epistles:

> Paul almost certainly did not write the letter to the Colossians. It is one of the forgeries in Paul's name, written after his death, as critical scholars have recognized for a very long time. And to argue that the passage derives from a pre-Pauline tradition is problematic. Colossians is *post*-Pauline, so on what grounds can we say that a passage in it is *pre*-Pauline?[201]

What Ehrman surprisingly says of Colossians can also be said of the Gospels: “The Gospels are *post*-Pauline, so on what grounds can it be said that passages in them are *pre*-Pauline?” If Ehrman finds it problematic to assume that a later document contains earlier information, it is remarkable that he thinks that a similar approach to the Gospels is perfectly acceptable, and even crucial to his case for Jesus’ historicity. This quite clearly invalidates his entire attempt to force the Gospels to predate Paul’s writings. It is all too obvious that Ehrman prefers the basic Gospel portrayal of Jesus (sans miracles and other obvious implausibilities), and will resort to thoroughly desperate – and contradictory – measures to ‘prove’ that it is the most authentic.

Ehrman, despite being an atheist, has pulled off a miraculous feat that would make Jesus proud. Just as Jesus was allegedly able to multiply several fish and loaves of bread to feed great multitudes of people,[202] Ehrman is able to turn a mere handful of interdependent and untrustworthy secondary sources into untold numbers of independent and highly historically accurate primary sources. He also, miraculously, transforms before our very eyes, the possible into the probable, and the probable into the certain. And that, dear readers, is how the great New Testament expert, Bart Ehrman, derives his complete and utter certainty over Jesus’ existence from the Gospels.[203] The same documents that he spends the majority of his career discrediting.

Before we leave this crucial topic, we may as well speculate as to why Ehrman so desperately needs the Gospels to derive from written sources that “date back at least to the 50s of the Common Era”[204] and oral sources that originated “probably in the 30s CE, within several years at least of the traditional date of the death of Jesus.” [205] Apart from him needing and desiring the sources he does not have, namely contemporary (or actually near-contemporary) and eyewitness accounts that contain genuine historical information, I suspect that he needs to address the critical problems that Paul’s writings present. Namely that Paul is our earliest Christian source, and may be portraying a very different view of Jesus. My suspicion seems entirely justified:

> But other traditions in the Gospels certainly do go back to Aramaic originals. This is highly significant. Aramaic Jews in Jesus’s native land were telling stories about him well

> before Paul wrote his letters in the 50s of the Common Era, arguably from within a few years of the traditional date of his death. One reason this matters is that most mythicists want to argue that the (*sic*) since the epistles of the New Testament were written earlier than the Gospels, and since the epistles, especially those of Paul, say little or nothing (it is argued) about the historical Jesus but instead speak only of the mythical Christ who like the pagan gods (again, it is argued) died and rose from the dead, then the earliest records of Christianity do not support the idea that Jesus actually lived; he was only a mythical concept.[206]

Unfortunately for Ehrman, his imaginary sources approach is untenable. When we focus on the sources that actually exist, Paul *is* our earliest Christian author, and all other existing sources might – directly or indirectly – derive from him. And of course, Ehrman has no right to assume that Paul's writings cannot also be subject to Ehrman's law; that they do not themselves derive from hypothetical foundational sources that predate all other (actual or non-existing) sources about Jesus, and that confirm the mythicists' views about the purely Celestial Jesus.[207] That the hypothetical foundational sources might actually be supportive of mythicists' views is not even addressed by Ehrman, though it seems like it should be of the utmost importance. Though much of his work is credible, when it comes to proving Jesus' historicity, Ehrman has clearly dropped the ball.

Beyond the Gospels

With the non-Christian sources dismissed, and the historical reliability of the Gospels unconvincingly argued for, Ehrman then analyses the Christian-sourced evidence for Jesus apart from the Gospels. The non-Canonical writings of Papias, Ignatius and Clement are somehow judged as useful by Ehrman, though they truly only demonstrate that later Christians believed in Jesus, which is not at all unexpected; nothing convincing is offered regarding these documents' veridicality.[208] The opposite is true, in fact. On his section on Papias, Ehrman notes that we have only fragments preserved in the texts of "later Christian authors", [209] and acknowledges that "Papias may pass on some legendary traditions about Jesus", and that he is not an eyewitness.[210] So again we have a Christian author who makes claims that are untrue, only now from the second century (at best). Ehrman may as well have stuck to the Gospels, which are at least first century documents.

On Ignatius of Antioch, yet another second century Christian writer, Ehrman offers nothing convincing regarding historical reliability and notes the former's criticisms of different forms of early Christianity; some so different that they even denied Jesus' fleshly existence.[211] Rather than helping Ehrman's case, he is actually sharing evidence that even early Christians believed in alternatives to the Biblical Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. I personally think that such alternative beliefs are very much unexpected (i.e. very improbable) if a fleshly Jesus truly walked the Earth only recently, and that 'everyone at the time knew it'. In other words, we should expect more unity, if Jesus did exist historically.

As he has done so disturbingly often thus far, Ehrman moves from the mere possibility that Ignatius is not "basing his views on the books that later became part of he New Testament" to the certainty that "Ignatius, then, provides us yet with another independent witness to the life of Jesus".[212] The non-existing sources strike again. Strangely, Ehrman doesn't even seem to consider the possibility that the likes of Papias and Ignatius use the very same hypothetical sources as the Gospel authors, so

that they would not, in fact, be providing additional independent witnesses.[213] In fact, there is also the possibility, however slim, that there is but one *Rashomon*-like[214] hypothetical source that forms the basis for all still-existing sources – and it is prefaced with "everything in this document is fictional, being designed to entertain, enlighten, and provoke".

And finally Ehrman turns to 1 Clement, the last of his non-Canonical Christian sources, and one that – significantly – is a first century document. It is anonymous, does not even mention Clement, and as per usual Ehrman fails to argue for its veridicality.[215] Ehrman makes a huff over a number of passages therein that apparently indicate that the anonymous author believes in an Earthly Jesus, oblivious to the fact that these passages are ambiguous and work equally well with alternative theories about Jesus (such as the Celestial Jesus), and that the anonymous author fails to reference any sources apart from God and the Old Testament. Ehrman takes it as a positive that Clement avoids mentioning the Gospels, as it could indicate yet another independent witness. However, this could just as easily mean that 'Clement' is a Christian in the way that mythicists often see Paul; one that believes in a purely Celestial Jesus that was not recently on Earth.

Turning back to the New Testament, Ehrman incompetently handles Acts much like he handled the Gospels: unique material therein means that there are hypothetical sources behind Acts, which support Jesus' historicity.[216] There is little point in focussing on Acts, as it is seen as the "second volume" to the Gospel of Luke,[217] shifts focus from Jesus to his followers, and suffers from the same issues that the Gospels do. One lowlight of this section is how Ehrman finds yet another independent tradition, as the description of Judas' death in Acts contradicts Matthew's account (which, as it is not found in the other Gospels, 'obviously' stems from M).[218] Excellent, we have two contradictory imaginary sources, so at least one of which must be wrong. Ehrman is ever happy to invent more and more non-existing sources, seemingly ignorant as to how he continuously casts doubt on them. Another noteworthy feature of Ehrman's comments on Acts is his admission that around one quarter of

the document consists of speeches,[219] and the realisation that speeches in ancient sources are often fabricated:

> We know from ancient historians such as Thucydides that it was customary for historical writers to invent the speeches of their main characters. There really was no other way to present a speech in an ancient biography or ancient history: the authors were almost never there to hear what was actually said on the occasion, and almost never (if ever) did anyone take notes. And so, as Thucydides indicates, historians came up with speeches that seemed appropriate for the occasion.[220]

Thankfully, Ehrman conjures another typically unjustified and unreferenced assertion:

> But the speeches in Acts are particularly notable because they are, in many instances, based not on Luke's fertile imagination but on oral traditions.[221]

Not only has Ehrman not properly described his method, and failed to provide any evidence for his assertions, he also unceremoniously disregards sound historical principles. And he does so, while being stubbornly unwilling to admit that unique material could simply originate with the author, and unnecessarily positing imaginary foundational sources. Due to one revealing quotation in particular, I suspect that Ehrman can at least understand why some might find his methods bizarre (emphasis mine):

> This is not a story invented by Mark; it was in circulation from the earliest period of Christian storytelling. That traditions of Jesus' life and death were circulating in the early years of the Christian community independently of Mark can also be shown, *somewhat ironically*, from sources that are even later than Mark.[222]

Ironic indeed. Just as ironic as when he does the same thing to lessen the importance of Paul's epistles, relative to the Gospel accounts. Ehrman goes on to briefly discuss the non-Pauline Epistles, with – again – no substantial argument as to their reliability. He enjoys pointing out that Paul's letter, 1 Timothy, and Peter's two letters seemingly refer to an Earthly Jesus, which, if true, is not unexpected given the existence of the Gospels; and all this whilst admitting that these documents are forged! [223]

> Among the writings that circulated under the name of Paul are a number that Paul did not actually write. One of them is the letter of 1 Timothy…[224]

> Peter too probably did not write either book that bears his name in the New Testament.[225]

Continuing his theme of trying to show that there were indeed Christians that believed in a Jesus that walked the Earth (no doubt to counter mythicists that favour Doherty's theories about a purely Celestial Jesus), which is not surprising in the slightest, Ehrman briefly invokes the book of Revelation, the anonymous 1 John, and the anonymous letter of the Hebrews, without any thought of convincing readers that these documents can be trusted as sources of authentic historical information.[226] Unfortunately for Ehrman, many of the scant passages he cites from the 'non-Gospel and non-Pauline books of the New Testament canon' that seemingly support Jesus' historicity are ambiguous, and apply just as well (or better) to the theory of minimal mythicism. A few examples from the book of Hebrews:

> • He was faithful to God (3:2).
> • He offered up prayers and loud cries and tears to be saved from death (presumably before his crucifixion; 5:7).
> • He learned obedience by suffering (5:8).
> • He was crucified (6:5; 12:2).[227]

All of this is quite possible with a Jesus that lives in a celestial realm 'above' the Earth. And of the short letter of Jude, Ehrman only comments that "the apostles of Jesus [are] mentioned", as if the mythicists' Celestial Jesus had no apostles.[228] Now we are left only one more source to consider, before the battle for the Pauline epistles begins: the Epistle of James. In my case for agnosticism, I make some important points about how James seems very much like Paul (if mythicists are correct about the latter's belief in a purely Celestial Jesus). Here is Ehrman's comprehensive analysis of this important document, which could even predate Paul's writings:[229]

> So far as we can tell, all the authors of the New Testament knew about the historical Jesus. One exception might be the writer of the letter of James, who mentions Jesus only twice in passing (1:1 and 2:1) without saying anything about his earthly life.[230]

That is it. Not only is Ehrman worryingly brief, it is clear why. This epistle does not support his views on Jesus. It does not even mention the Historical Jesus or the Gospel Jesus, which would be somewhat surprising if this is the James that is supposedly Jesus' brother (James himself never claims this). In fact, it almost looks like Ehrman is admitting that James does not know about his version of Jesus, and is talking about a different type of Jesus. As seemingly acknowledged by Ehrman, the two verses he mentioned offer nothing substantial in arguing for Jesus' historicity and could obviously refer to the Celestial Jesus:

> James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.[231]
>
> My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.[232]

Finally, Ehrman shall now delve into the sources that could destroy his own case for Jesus' historicity. It is time to deal with the problem of Paul.

The Problem of Paul

> The Apostle Paul is our earliest surviving Christian author of any kind... His first letter (1 Thessalonians) is usually dated to 49CE; his last (Romans?) to some twelve or thirteen years after that.[233]

That Paul's writings are the earliest extant Christian sources is no small concession. Historical Jesus agnostics and mythicists tend to highlight Paul's lack of knowledge concerning Jesus' apparently recent appearance on Earth; his teachings, his miracles, where he lived and worked, *when* he lived and worked, and other basic facts of his life. This often leads to the theorising that Paul and similar early Christians (perhaps James, Peter, and Clement) did not believe in a Jesus that was recently on Earth, but in a purely Celestial Jesus. One that lived, died, and resurrected (for our benefit) in an upper realm. This sort of theory seems absolutely crazy, because of our familiarity with the basic Gospel story. However, the Gospels are the *later* documents. They could well be adapting what could be the original story. If we read Paul as Paul, which is strangely a novel approach to New Testament hermeneutics, amazing things will happen.

Before properly delving into this theory (which will be revisited again and again – and in greater detail – throughout this book), we must remember that this theory is really only important in moving the case from agnosticism to mythicism. I do not find Paul to be a reliable transmitter of authentic historical information, primarily due to his supernatural claims and the sources he identifies, so that – just as with the Gospels – agnosticism is assured. The discussion over what kind of Jesus is described in Paul's writings is extra. And it could obliterate Ehrman's case for Jesus. It is no wonder then, that Ehrman begins by claiming that there is "evidence that Paul understood Jesus to be a historical figure" and that "some mythicists" respond by claiming that such passages are later insertions (interpolations).[234] In this section, we will focus on Ehrman's case for Paul's reliability, and Paul's view of Jesus.

Ehrman refers to verses such as Galatians 4:4 (Jesus was "born"), 1 Corinthians 15:5 ("he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve"), 1 Corinthians 11:22-24 (the "Last Supper"), and Paul's knowledge of Jesus' resurrection.[235] Ehrman is also impressed that Paul knows "that he died by crucifixion".[236] That Paul, who should have known much about the Earthly Jesus, and appealed to his authority, if he existed, provides us with only a handful of such verses is astonishing. Even worse for Ehrman, it is obvious that all of this is compatible with Earl Doherty's basic Celestial Jesus theory, and with possibly one exception, appealing to an interpolation is unnecessary. (Let us keep in mind the fact that many interpolations were made, and also important is that the early Christian Marcion thought that Paul's writings were corrupted by Judaizing interpolators.)[237] That exception:

> For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.[238]

If this passage literally means that the Jews killed Jesus, rather than, say, the nasty demons that live in an upper realm, it would seem clear that Paul thinks of Jesus' death as having occurred on Earth. Unfortunately for Ehrman, this passage is widely seen as an interpolation, which, while disagreeing, he acknowledges:

> This is indicated in a passage that is much disputed – in this instance, not just among mythicists… It is this last sentence that has caused interpreters problems… That would seem to make sense if Paul were writing in the years after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, that is, after 70 CE… For that reason, a number of scholars have argued that this entire passage has been inserted into 1 Thessalonians and that Paul therefore did not write it.[239]

With Paul writing the letter around 49 CE, and the passage being quite anti-Semitic (Paul was Jewish and, while reaching out to Gentiles, shows no disdain for 'the Jews'),[240] it is no wonder that scholars often conclude that this is an obvious interpolation. Ehrman asks for "hard evidence" that Paul did not write this,[241] which is rather unsophisticated and sets a double standard, as there is also no "hard evidence" – given that

we don't have the original copies anymore and that the documents were preserved by Christians who were often happy to make changes (all of which he acknowledges)[242] – that anything in the Gospels or Paul's epistles is authentic.

Let us also consider that Paul elsewhere blames the "rulers of this age" for killing Jesus, who were either the Roman rulers or the demonic forces up above, but certainly not members of a subjugated people.[243] Also, the passage could be intended figuratively, with the Jews' insistence on sinning effectively necessitating Jesus' death, whether on Earth or in some celestial realm.[244] There is clearly enough wriggle room to avoid the conclusion that this passage definitely confirms the Gospels' account/s. Ehrman seems to drop his probabilistic approach to history (there is no black and white, but various shades of grey) when it suits him. Of course, any 'anti-Semitic' attempt to argue for the authenticity of the passage will essentially rely on assumptions made about the *later* Gospels.

With Ehrman's discussion on the hints of Jesus' earthly life to be found in the Pauline epistles over, it must be noted that he did not actually argue for Paul's reliability. He overlooked that Paul never mentions historical sources, that he specifically rules out human sources,[245] and that whenever he does mention a source, it is always God or the Celestial Jesus – directly via revelation or indirectly via the Old Testament. Paul even has the audacity to never refer to Ehrman's beloved, and incredibly numerous, imaginary written and oral sources! Paul, with his exclusively divine sources, is clearly not the ideal historian.

The secular and objective scholar must see him either as a liar, mentally disabled, or someone who otherwise treats hallucinations and dreams as real, like many members of charismatic cults. Ehrman vaguely appeals to "Jewish circles" wherein traditions are passed on from teacher to teacher, and apparently claimed to be given directly from God (which obviously would still be a lie).[246] This claim is unreferenced and does not aid his case in the slightest, given that Paul and "Jewish circles" make all sorts of miraculous and otherwise implausible claims that secular scholars – like Ehrman – reject. Where is his positive case for Paul's

reliability? Like Ehrman's hypothetical sources, it doesn't exist. Except for this:

> When Paul swears he is not lying, I generally believe him.[247]

Thank God that Paul swore it! You will have to forgive me for not being convinced by Paul's claims, or by Ehrman's naïve 'method'. Furthermore, if Ehrman believes that Paul is "not lying" (a claim made in Galatians 1:18-19) about meeting with Peter and James,[248] and possibly what he earlier mentioned, why doesn't Ehrman believe Paul when he says that he knows all he knows about Jesus solely via God's revelation, and was not taught by humans (Galatians 1:11-12, the very same chapter Ehrman quotes)? Any why doesn't Ehrman deal with *this* revelation (that of Galatians 1:11-12, and pardon the pun) at all?

He surely knows the passage exists; I shall assume Ehrman's selective ignorance and confirmation bias. Ehrman also asserts that Paul sometimes alludes to the teachings of the Historical Jesus, even when the latter is not referenced.[249] This is surprisingly uncritical, as the Gospels that ascribe such teachings to Jesus are the *later* documents. Scholars cannot ignore the possibility that the Gospels are falsely attributing (whilst also embellishing) Paul's teachings to a historicised, anthropomorphised, allegorised, or euhemerised[250] Jesus and are merely – and falsely – claiming that this all happened decades before Paul put pen to paper.

Additionally, Ehrman claims that Paul "paraphrases a saying of Jesus"[251] which not only is dubious because Paul's writings predate the Gospels, and again alludes to Ehrman's non-existing sources, but also because Ehrman ignores a much-loved principle of Biblical criticism: that the simpler or shorter reading is likely more authentic. Paul gives us the *earlier* and *simpler* teaching, and yet Ehrman has the gall to imply that Paul effectively plagiarised the Gospel Jesus. Interestingly, while still unable to shake his Gospel-influenced presuppositions, Ehrman goes on to acknowledge that maybe Paul did occasionally receive his knowledge via revelation from "the Lord" rather than circulating stories about the Gospel Jesus:

> In several other instances Paul indicates that he is echoing a "word" or "commandment of the Lord." This happens in his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians [*4:13-18*], where he is discussing the future return of Jesus from heaven… As indicated earlier, the mythicist G. A. Wells argues that the sayings of Jesus in Paul's writings were given to him not from the traditions about the teachings of the historical Jesus but from prophecies delivered in Paul's churches, direct revelations from the Lord of heaven. In some instances that may indeed have been the case, and this passage in 1 Thessalonians may be one example of it.[252]

Ironically, Ehrman's surprising admission is rooted in the fact that the passage is not described in the Gospels, which again reveals his Gospel-tainted vision, his willingness to put the cart before the horse, particularly as he refers to the "return of Jesus" and "the second coming", when Paul's passage only says "the coming of the Lord".[253] Back to the main point, if Ehrman is willing to concede that at least *some* of what Paul knows about Jesus comes from (what are seen as) divine revelations, why dismiss the possibility that all of Paul's knowledge comes direct from God, or the Old Testament scriptures? Indeed, that is all Paul ever claims. Given that Ehrman generally believes Paul's "I am not lying!" claim, it is unforgiveable that he does not trust Paul when Paul clearly and numerously says that his sources about Jesus are divine, and explicitly not human.

Ehrman even admits that "it is impossible" to know whether Paul here relies on Ehrman's innumerable imaginary sources or revelations from God.[254] We can only wonder why Ehrman does not apply this same reasoning to the unique material found in each Gospel, especially at the beginning of Luke's gospel, which I think could give some indication that Luke is, like Paul, claiming a divine source. And so Ehrman ends another section of his book, on Jesus teachings in Paul's writings, without making a case for why we should trust Paul, a biased writer who believes in blood magic, resurrections, and divine revelations. The only thing that comes close, is yet another claim of a hypothetical foundational source:

> I have mentioned, for example, Romans 1:3-4, an ancient adoptionistic creed about Jesus that indicates he "became" the son of God only when he was raised from the dead. This creed was not written by Paul… He is using, then, an earlier creed that was in circulation before his writing.[255]

This does not even necessarily reference an Earthly Jesus. And again, this imaginary source is asserted without "hard evidence", and Ehrman overlooks that, again, here is a supposed foundational source that is fictional. Unless, of course, Ehrman now believes in resurrections and the existence of God. It is as if Ehrman is not even aware that feebly positing these foundational sources is not enough. He must convince us that we should trust them, especially when they are – like the "scant literary remains that survive" – filled with obvious fictions and implausible claims. Ehrman then wraps up his "discussion of the historical evidence by stressing just two points in particular… these two points are especially key."[256]

The first point is wholly unconvincing in that it centres on the relationships that Paul claims he had with Peter and James.[257] Of course, if Peter was indeed one of the earthly Jesus' closest disciples, and James was truly the biological brother of Jesus, then Paul's writings may indeed indicate that he believed in Jesus' Earthly historicity – which still says nothing about the trustworthiness of Paul's claims (both about Jesus and about Paul's relationships). Unfortunately for Ehrman, none of this is known from Paul's writings, but from the *later* Gospels; once again Ehrman overlooks the possibility that the later documents are elaborating on the earlier ones, and is simply assuming what he is supposed to be arguing for.

Like many scholars, Ehrman is – perhaps unintentionally – committed to eisegesis rather than exegesis. He reads the Gospels into Paul, rather than simply reading Paul as Paul. Even Christian scholar Marcus Borg recognised that reading the New Testament texts in chronological order "illustrates that there were vibrant Christian communities spread throughout the Roman Empire before there were written Gospels", and that "Placing the Gospels after Paul makes it clear that as written documents they are not the source of early Christianity but its product."[258] As we shall later see, reading Paul as Paul, and Mark as Mark, may very well lead us down some alternative and intellectually stimulating avenues. I'll have more to say about James later, including a brief explanation of how Ehrman's own research indicates that the relevant passage is a later interpolation.

Ehrman's second key point is merely that Jesus was (apparently counter-intuitively) believed to be crucified;[259] a hypothesis which is entirely compatible with minimal mythicism.[260] Somehow Ehrman, happy to think that Jewish Christians would retroactively reflect on Jesus' need to suffer,[261] finds it impossible that a Jew would have "made up the idea of a crucified messiah", with the Jewish Messiah supposed to be "a figure of grandeur and power", yet simultaneously finds no problem with his preferred theory that "a lower-class peasant from rural Galilee" convinced people that "he must be the messiah".[262] Ehrman also thinks that Jesus' early followers came to believe that the just-deceased Jesus had been raised by God. What then is the problem with the theory that says the earliest Christians simply had revelations from a purely celestial being, just as many had (claimed), before and since? I think that Ehrman's own writings make it clear that part of his fallacious reasoning stems from his Gospel-based presuppositions, and his naïve and generalised assumptions about what all ancient Jews would have believed.[263]

It is as if Ehrman is blissfully unaware that there existed a multitude of Jewish and Christian religions, many of which are unknown to us today, each interpreting their texts differently (perhaps Isaiah 52-53, focusing on the 'suffering servant', was one such text)[264] and incorporating varying amounts of 'foreign' material (and also with adherents of differing motives and mental capabilities)[265]. Unfortunately, Ehrman offers no proof for his strong claim that the suffering messiah would be such a verboten idea. In fact, Jews (and Pagans) already highly valued martyrdom and human sacrifice, so it seems very counterintuitive to view the notion as ridiculous.

Whilst Ehrman thinks that "Dying to atone for sin was not part of the ancient pagan mythology",[266] it does not take a genius to realise that the Jewish practice of sacrificing animals to atone for sin combined with pagan stories about suffering and sacrificial gods/demigods would produce just that concept, and a figure just like Jesus. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection could also easily be seen as a Platonic 'noble lie', cleverly incorporating Jewish and Pagan elements.[267] The Jews were surrounded by Pagans, who had numerous myths of suffering saviour figures,

suffering messiahs. To suppose that the Jews would be uninfluenced by this bombardment of Pagan concepts strains credulity, and ignores the many times that the Jews were influenced by their Pagan neighbours and Pagan predecessors. It is this syncretism that arguably kept the faith alive, as we shall later see. To stubbornly and naively declare that Judaism would emerge unscathed and unchanged, even from its beginnings, is to play the role of apologist and not the role of a critical scholar of religion.

Note also that Ehrman here claims that "Isaiah is not speaking about the future messiah", which somewhat contradicts his noting that 'the messiah' was also 'the chosen one'. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is the 'chosen' or 'elect' one, and Ehrman has, in his most recent book, acknowledged that the messiah was also referred to as 'elect', 'chosen', and other terms.[268] Ehrman also ignores the Jewish tradition of finding new meanings in old scriptures (such as pesher exegesis or haggadic midrash – and what a time to do this, what with messianic expectations and the Roman occupation and all),[269] and shockingly adds, "he was never interpreted by any Jews prior to the first century as referring to the messiah."[270]

Of course, Ehrman is also forgetting that there are literally trillions of pre-Christian Jewish foundational sources that do just that; these sources no longer exist but "they obviously did exist at one time". I couldn't resist. [271] Seriously, Ehrman's unsophisticated and overly simplistic view of religion here is particularly surprising, given his standing as a personally secular Biblical scholar, and his authorship of *Lost Christianities* (recall that Christian sects were/are also Jewish sects).[272] It also makes a mockery of his later – and correct – assertion that it "is important to recognize that views of Jesus did not develop in a straight line in all Christian communities at the same pace".[273] Even in this very same book, he acknowledges the many different kinds of Jews living at the time. [274]

He goes to great lengths to describe four major Jewish sects, and notes that "most people didn't belong to any" of the sects.[275] He may be understating things a little. Based on the statistics he himself provides, generally sourced from Josephus,[276] I calculate that less than 1%

belonged to these four major sects, meaning that more than 99% of the roughly four million Jews living at the time “didn’t belong to any”.[277] Surely that provides ample wiggle room for a divergent opinion or two – and this ignores the possibility for schisms within the ‘known’ groups. Surely one of these people could have experienced a hallucination or three. We will never even know of most of these ‘divergent opinions’. Of course, we must not forget the highly syncretistic Hellenistic Jew, Philo of Alexandria, who was all too happy to enmesh Plato (Pagan) and Moses (Jewish), to interpret the Jewish scriptures allegorically, and who may well have set the foundations for the ‘creation’ of Christianity.[278] Let us also consider the thoughts of New Testament expert Otto Piper:

> This survey of the intertestamental period has shown that Judaism had never reached agreement on what to expect of the future, except that all believed that God would eventually vindicate His people. In turn, none of the eschatological or messianic views claimed exclusive authority; thus divergent views could easily coexist. Modern attempts to reduce this multiplicity to one system do violence to the evidence.[279]

All serious scholars specialising in Judaism and Christianity know of the great diversities among ancient Jews and Christians, and Ehrman is most certainly no exception. It seems highly disingenuous that in this instance, he would ‘forget’ this most obvious of facts. For example, limiting ourselves to the major sects we are fairly knowledgeable about (even then, very little is known), the Sadducees stressed the importance of the Jewish Temple; the Pharisees and the Essenes not so much. The Jewish Temple is supposed to be kind of a big deal to ‘Jews’, so it clearly is difficult to identify truly verboten concepts among Jews of the era. This is especially true when considering the (undeniable) Hellenistic influence on Palestine. There are many more examples that demonstrate the futility of dishonestly implying that all Jews or all Christians were of one accord.

One particularly decisive example is that some Jews and early Christians saw the god of the Old Testament as ‘the devil’, to the horror of more mainstream Christians.[280] Some Christians even dared to entertain the notion that Jesus may not have come in the flesh, which Ehrman is quite aware of.[281] And yet somehow, Ehrman also indicates that while the idea of a suffering Messiah is acceptable to Christians, it would be unthinkable to Jews.[282] Apart from the great diversities already

mentioned, surely he must realise that some Jews did believe as much, and could (and would) become Christians. It is somewhat embarrassing to have to even mention it, but all but the most unsophisticated of scholars and students in the relevant fields are aware that early Christianities were, in fact, Jewish sects. The question then is not 'Did some Jews believe in a suffering Messiah?', but 'Did the belief in a suffering Messiah lead to stories about Jesus or did stories about Jesus lead to the belief in a suffering Messiah?' Ehrman continues:

> That no Jew would make up such an idea is made crystal clear by Paul himself in one of his letters. When writing to the Corinthians Paul makes the intriguing and compelling statement that the fact that Christians proclaimed a messiah who had been crucified was the single greatest "stumbling block" for Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23) and a completely ridiculous claims to Gentiles (same verse). That is to say, Jews didn't buy it. And why not? Because for Jews this very claim – the heart of the Christians' affirmation of their faith – was absurd, offensive, and potentially blasphemous.[283]

There is so much wrong with Ehrman's quotation here, that we do not have time to address all his errors of fact and logic. First of all, in his zeal to put mythicists in their place and to portray Paul as a reliable source, Ehrman doesn't even bother to question if Paul (or his interpretation of Paul) is correct. He is not. We have absolutely no "hard evidence" that all Jews abhorred the idea of a crucified or suffering messiah, and Gentiles actually had numerous 'suffering saviours'. Attis, for example, was castrated, and Prometheus was tortured for his efforts in famously delivering to us the Olympians' fire. And, as is so often the case when people use the Bible to advance their views, Ehrman ignores the context of the verse. In fact, he ignores the latter part of the very same sentence (emphasis mine):

> Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, *but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks,* Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For *the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom,* and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But *God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise*; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. *God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,* so that no one may boast before him.[284]

It is very clear that Paul talks of a “stumbling block” and “foolishness” for many, but *not for all*. For some, specifically those who God called, it is “wisdom”. Ehrman is simply applying to all Jews (and all Gentiles) what may have applied to most, even though the person he is quoting does not. But ‘most’ is obviously not ‘all’. Note also in verse 22, how Paul claims that the “Jews demand signs”. Isn’t that what Jesus had given them just a few years previous, with his amazing ministry of healings, exorcisms, and other miracles? Are the Greeks unaware of Jesus’ wise teachings? It seems that Paul, and these Jews and Greeks, are unaware of Jesus’ earthly career, which doesn’t seem to make sense unless we entertain the notion that Jesus did not exist historically.

Note also that, again, a double standard is applied. Recall earlier that Ehrman criticised Wells for “second-guessing someone from two thousand years ago whom we don’t really know and have limited access to”. Ehrman also later criticises Doherty for talking “about ‘the’ view of the world in antiquity”, noting that “Ancient views of the world were extremely complex and varied”.[285] And yet Ehrman feels like he can speak not just for “someone” but for *all* Jews, and, even more absurdly, all Gentiles/Greeks. This unjust double standard is again made clear when later criticising the opinions of another mythicist. In this example, Ehrman discovers for himself how silly it is to think that we can make generalised claims about all members of a religious group (just substitute ‘early Christian’ for ‘Jew’):

> … this is actually hard to show; how would we know this about “every” early Christian, unless all of them left us writings and told us everything they knew and did? [286]

Additionally, Ehrman does recognise that some Jews and/or Christians (early Christians were Jews) would indeed incorporate pagan concepts, specifically those pertaining to Christ-like figures of earlier religions and mythologies (i.e. the dreaded ‘pagan parallels’):

> As was the case with the earlier claim [*that the Gospels are interpretive paraphrases of the Old Testament*], I think there is a good deal to be said for the idea that Christians did indeed shape their stories about Jesus in light of other figures who were similar to him. [287]

> Yes, early Christians told stories about Jesus in light of what they thought about other divine men in their environment – or used to think before they converted. Modern critical historians have noted these parallels…And scholars have long discussed why the parallels create problems for knowing exactly what Jesus really said and did. The early storytellers shaped their stories about Jesus according to the models available to them, making up details – and sometimes entire stories – or altering features here and there.[288]

It seems quite obvious that the more this can be shown, the more we should question if there is room in any of this for a Historical Jesus. Interestingly, Ehrman now admits that "Saying what Jews thought is itself highly problematic, since lots of different Jews thought lots of different things. It would be like asking what Christians think today."[289] He also recently acknowledged that if Rabbinical sources condemned heresies, and they often did, then it obviously means that some Jews did hold such wildly different beliefs.[290] The 1 Corinthians passage also reveals the dangers of trying to assume what is embarrassing to Jews and Christians of the era, or what is dissimilar to their views.

Such people could well go down a counter-intuitive path, perceiving it as something that most would consider foolish but that God considers wise. It is the very fact that the idea is counter-intuitive that makes it appealing, to some, and potentially worthy of fabrication.[291] In Ehrman's narrow view of these great faiths, where all are of one mind (which he himself disputes as per the above quotations), it is hard to see how religions could possibly evolve and yield other religions – which is, of course, exactly what happens, what has happened, and what will, without question, continue to happen.

Ehrman's view also displays the sort of arrogance and presuppositionalism normally reserved for conservative apologists. To deny the religious influences of the indigenous Canaanites, the conquering Babylonians, Persians, and Romans, the apparently enslaving Egyptians, and the always-influential Greeks (likewise, many of these cultures were influenced by older religious concepts, such as from the Indians and Mesopotamians), and to deny that different Jews would react differently to these influences, is simply ludicrous and amateurish. For Heaven's sake, the many books of the Old Testament reveal evidence of these influences and differing reactions, with God and Judaism(s) clearly evolving over

time. Ehrman, who must be living under a rock, need only have considered the mainstream Documentary Hypothesis.

But there is yet more to say about Ehrman's treatment of the suffering servant in Isaiah 52-53. He makes a big deal of the fact that the passage therein does not ever use the word 'messiah'.[292] In this, he is correct – which is a nice change from the multitude of errors he has made so far. But he errs again, unfortunately, in supposing that that is the end of the story, that Jews could not imagine a suffering messiah. For numerous reasons, this is completely illogical, most importantly that later – if not earlier – Jews did, in fact, see Isaiah 52-53 as alluding to a future, and suffering, messiah. All we need do is consult the Babylonian Talmud and the Melchizedek Scroll, though there is much more in the Jewish intertestamental literature.[293] (Note the stark contrast regarding methods: Jesus agnostics/mythicists appeal to sources that actually exist. Ehrman simply makes up the sources he wishes he had.)[294]

And all that is really needed is for it to seem plausible that *one* Jew would see the Messiah in Isaiah 52-53, and there really is no good argument to say that it is implausible. Even if we can dispute that we have direct evidence for Jewish belief in a suffering Messiah, it only needs to be possible, for our hypothesis-making. Unless Ehrman can comprehensively prove it impossible, we can still work with the hypothesis and consider how it could explain the available evidence. Also, Ehrman's stance here makes a mockery of what he and many of his colleagues know regarding the Old Testament's influence on the Gospels.

None of the Old Testament prophecies that Matthew and the others link to Jesus explicitly refers to 'Jesus Christ', yet we all know that early Jewish Christians, such as the Gospel authors, did just that – they found connections, rightly or wrongly, between Old Testament passages, and the 'Gospel Jesus'. Finally, Ehrman appeals to the contextual Isaiah 49:3[295] to argue that 'the servant' is Israel, whilst overlooking that passage's immediate context,[296] which alludes to a figure that is made by God as God's servant, who will assist with the *salvation* of Jews and Gentiles. [297] Sounds very *Messiah*-like, does it not? If you were crazy enough, you just might think that that sounds a little like Jesus… And again, the

original meaning certainly does not preclude later believers from creating new meanings.

There is room to discuss one more bizarre aspect of Ehrman's case. He dedicated a section of his book to Jewish apocalypticism, which he thinks/concedes arose just before the time of Jesus' birth.[298] This includes a brief description of the "cosmic battle" between the forces of good and evil, and the Jewish belief that God would send "a saviour figure", "some referred to him as a messiah; others, basing their views on the earliest surviving apocalyptic text we have, the book of Daniel, referred to him as the Son of Man". Incredibly, Ehrman goes on to describe the Son of Man thusly: "This cosmic figure would destroy the forces that aligned themselves against God along with all the people on earth who joined with them".[299]

Back up a little. Did Ehrman just call the messiah, the Son of Man, a 'cosmic figure', who would defeat the sky-demons, and admit that 'some Jews' before Jesus' time believed in such a figure? Yes, yes he did. It is astonishing then, that he finds it virtually impossible that Paul's claimed revelations from a celestial messiah could arise quite naturally from this scenario, without the need for him to know anything about a human and earthly Jesus. Paul's claims and his lack of knowledge about the Gospels certainly indicate that Paul is not a Gospel-influenced 'Christian', but simply an 'apocalypticist Jew', who thinks that the celestial messiah is talking to him.[300] Ehrman effectively agrees, though he, armed with his ever-present Gospel presuppositions, ruins the thought by supposing that Paul later came to know the Gospel story:

> From what little we know about Pharisees, it appears that they adhered to apocalyptic views. This means that Paul would have been an apocalyptic Jew even before coming to believe in Jesus.[301]

Ehrman has almost here presented a case for the (exclusively) Celestial Jesus! In fact, in his most recent book, he realises that some of the very early Christians thought of Jesus as a pre-existent divine being. [302] As we shall see throughout this book, and contrary to the claims of historicists, the beliefs of Ehrman and his colleagues are not necessarily so far removed from those of the most sophisticated ahistoricists. Already

comfortable with the fact that Paul could believe in a celestial messiah/Christ without any knowledge of an Historical Jesus, all Ehrman would seemingly need to do to become a full-blown mythicist is to realise that 'some Jews' also saw this figure as suffering and/or sacrificial.[303] Indeed, several mainstream scholars acknowledge that pre-Gospel and pre-Christian Jewish texts demonstrate an existing Jewish belief in a suffering/dying messiah.[304]

That the messiah would suffer is not a concept merely invented by desperate Christians upset over Jesus' death; it was something Jews, pre-Jesus, already believed in. The non-canonical Maccabean books also extol the virtues of martyrdom, and possibly even present a blueprint of sorts for the Christian Messiah, with much talk about human blood sacrifices as atoning for the sins of Israel.[305] That pre-Christian Jews expected a suffering Messiah may also explain why Paul, ignorant about the Gospel story, so casually refers to the Messiah dying "for our sins according to the [*pre-Christian* Scriptures".[306] Ehrman is simply wrong to think that (non-Christian) Jews could not create a suffering messiah, and if he ever acknowledges this, well…

Surely even Ehrman could not ignore that a sacrificial and cosmic Jewish messiah would be the Celestial Jesus beloved by mythicists, and that the earthly Gospel Jesus would then necessarily be a later development (as indicated by the textual record, when unencumbered by copious quantities of imaginary sources), a somewhat euhemerised allegorisation of this earlier, even pre-Christian, concept. If Paul could be considered an apocalypticist Jew rather than a 'Christian', and the latter term is reserved for those who uphold the literal importance of the Gospels, it could be argued that Christianity has its origins in a misunderstanding: in ignorance over the fact that Mark's Gospel was only allegorical.

And yet, Ehrman concludes his case by proudly proclaiming that "Jesus certainly existed", and indicates that his case for Jesus' existence is complete.[307] I must be forgiven for not being convinced by a case that effectively revolved around Ehrman's very convenient but completely imaginary foundational sources, and his failure to connect the dots. And

nowhere in Ehrman's case, already suspect due to his reliance on non-extant sources, was the reliability of the existing sources substantially scrutinised. It was simply assumed that the anonymous authors of these non-contemporaneous accounts (the Gospels) intended to present an accurate history of relatively recent events, that they did so competently, and that the 'true' message has been preserved virtually unchanged. The latter is particularly surprising given the obviously mythical content of the Gospels and the proven record of textual manipulation, which Ehrman's greater body of work discusses at length.

Ehrman's faith in the sources is rather naïve. While he happily accepts that the Gospel authors would fabricate outlandish claims such as people coming back from the dead or walking on water,[308] he finds it unthinkable that a Jew would 'make up' more mundane claims such as that their Messiah would suffer, or that they would have fabricated the whole story.[309] This is characteristic of secular Jesus historicists. They happily disparage the Gospels when it comes to the claims made of the Biblical Jesus, but when it comes to the Historical Jesus, these highly questionable documents are suddenly transformed into ideal sources that provide otherwise sceptical and critical scholars with the utmost certainty. While the supernatural portions of the stories are easily dismissed, somehow more mundane portions are often assumed historically authentic, despite the fact that even many of those are also obvious fictions, such as Matthew's massacre of the innocents and the Lukan account of the census of Quirinius.[310]

Basically, here endeth Ehrman's case. The latter parts of Ehrman's book deal with other issues. It is the first part of his book that is of interest to us, as it presents his positive case for Jesus' historicity. Nevertheless, significant portions from the latter parts are addressed throughout this book. Part II of *Did Jesus Exist?* reveals something very disturbing, that I must stress again. In apparently debunking various mythicists' claims, he makes it clear that mythicists attempt to explain Paul's portrayal of Jesus through *sources that actually exist*. Ehrman's approach is, as we have so decisively seen, to push the basic Gospel portrayal of Jesus (less the bits he doesn't like) through *sources that don't exist*, rather than to ascribe it all to actually existing sources and the creativity of the authors (both of

which he actually admits, though not in whole). And yet, the prevailing scholarly view is that it is the mythicist that grasps at straws. This is simply unfair, and indicates the parochial and anachronistic nature of the field. The third and final part of Ehrman's book merely outlines his particular (apocalyptic) view of the Historical Jesus, once historicity is assumed.

So, that is it. That is what we have been waiting decades for. A respected, high-profile, and secular scholar of the New Testament finally published a book-length treatment to demonstrate that Jesus certainly existed. And it is woeful. Rather than convincingly explain why it is crazy to imagine that Jesus was a completely fictional character, all Ehrman achieves is to instruct scholars how *not* to argue for Jesus' historicity. He simply offered nothing convincing. Ehrman's *Did Jesus Exist?* resolves nothing and fails to convincingly answer its eponymous question. After all, Ehrman's *coup de grâce* is his massive collection of imaginary sources.

Sources that do not exist and cannot be scrutinised. Sources that could well confirm that everything he thinks he knows about Jesus is wrong. Sources that could confirm that the Christians were right after all, or that shore up the growing number of believers in minimal mythicism. The very appeal to these *imaginary* sources – particularly when *actual* sources, like the Old Testament and pagan writings, are often overlooked – is effectively a confession that the case for the Historical Jesus is not as strong as traditionally believed, and that Ehrman is desperately clutching at straws. Ehrman's *Did Jesus Exist?* is not worth the paper it is printed on. If this is the best that Jesus historicists can do, my agnosticism over the matter is already justified, and it is a wonder why more people are not questioning Jesus' historical existence.

I cannot help but feel some sympathy for Ehrman and his historicist colleagues, as the burden placed on them is so great, largely due to their own actions. They spend almost all of their careers discrediting the Gospels as reliable sources of information, and when the time comes to establish that the Historical Jesus certainly existed, they must backpedal and assert that the Gospels are really not that bad after all. One wonders

that if the Gospels are such great sources, and are backed up by earlier sources that are generally believable, if Christian adherents would then have some justification for believing in their Biblical Jesus. These historicist scholars expend much effort in regaling their fellow non-believers, whilst horrifying Christians, with tales of the poor state of the sources concerning Jesus. Then when we should ask why we should accept the existence of even a stripped-down Jesus, they are forced to explain that "the sources are great!"

Unfortunately, what Ehrman says of another can easily be applied to himself: "Even smart people make mistakes".[311] Fortunately for Ehrman's fellow historicists, he is not the only respected New Testament expert to publish a scholarly book on the issue in recent times. Maurice Casey has joined the exclusive group. And given the uselessness of Ehrman's book, it would seem very unlikely that Casey's offering – the last of his distinguished career – could be any worse…

2. THE CASE FOR HISTORICITY: CASEY

Poisoning the Well

Ehrman's book arguing for what is already the consensus view is so underwhelming that the now late Maurice Casey found it necessary to also weigh in on the debate, with what would be his last book, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* Published in 2014, Casey acknowledges Ehrman's "bold attempt", but alluded to the latter's "regrettable mistakes".[312] Casey aims to primarily "set out the main arguments for the existence as a historical figure of Jesus", and secondarily, to refute the claims of the opposing mythicists.[313] Regrettably, he completely misrepresents mythicism, mythicists and mythicist approaches.

Casey fails to outline his own method, and, like Ehrman, he also relies heavily on hypothetical sources. He defends against the problem of Paul, though somewhat unnecessarily, as he argues for the Gospels' primacy by employing radically unorthodox dating methods. Casey finally attempts to engage with mythicist claims, though he focuses on the more amateurish mythicists, with barely a coherent word about Earl Doherty, who may have presented the most convincing mythicist hypothesis thus far (despite technically being an amateur). The tone of Casey's work is also unprofessional and, at times, crude.

Casey's introductory chapter is an attempt to 'poison the well', is filled with easily avoidable errors about mythicism, and includes unnecessary *ad hominem* argumentation. In a section disrespectfully entitled ''Scholars'' (inverted commas included), Casey attempts to discredit "the most influential mythicists", yet includes Bart Ehrman, who is precisely the opposite of a Jesus mythicist (and is indeed a *bona fide* scholar), and numerous figures who are technically amateurs and not actually mythicists, such as "Blogger Godfrey" (Neil Godfrey is more of an agnostic on the issue, much like myself).[314] Casey irrelevantly portrays mythicists as anti-Christian[315] and former fundamentalists, [316] which is demonstrably false; and something Casey would have known by doing what researchers are supposed to do: research.

He needn't even have search long and hard. Carrier's more liberal, non-fundamentalist, Christian background has been public knowledge – via books and internet essays – for over a decade before Casey published his book. Carrier's example also highlights the irrelevance of Casey's approach, as he was an atheist for over fifteen years before he even came to see Jesus' ahistoricity as plausible. The most bizarre aspect of Casey's tactic is hat he is demonstrably wrong even by his own work. For example, Casey himself acknowledges that Doherty was not raised as "an American Protestant fundamentalist", but as a Catholic.[317] Furthermore, Ehrman – as with many other secular, mainstream, historicist scholars specialising in the Historical Jesus – could also be described as a former fundamentalist, and he is certainly no mythicist!

These unnecessary and libellous errors are continued throughout the book, with Casey bizarrely accusing mythicists of being unable to accept that Jesus had a brother (i.e. James, the 'brother of the Lord'), as "mythicists used to be conservative Christians: they did not believe that Jesus had natural brothers because they believed in the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary".[318] One can only wonder how this had passed peer-review.[319] It now seems that Casey is accusing all mythicists of being former Catholics – and that virtually all conservative Christians are Catholics! – which is also demonstrably false, even by his own hand (other Christian groups share the doctrine, but it is certainly not characteristic of American Protestant fundamentalists, for example).[320]

Given the multitude of easily avoidable errors that inexplicably made it past the peer-review process in the early part of this book alone, one must wonder how relevant it is to note that many mythicists' specialisations are outside the field of New Testament studies and tend to self-publish. Pointing out the rest of Casey's errors in this regard, as well as the blatant contradictions of his own erroneous claims, would be too tedious and time-consuming. I'm sure that readers would prefer to hear about how horrendous Casey's methods are, particularly when compared to the best work of the most scholarly mythicists and agnostics.

‘Method’

The chapter entitled ‘Historical method’ unfortunately makes no significant mention of Casey’s methods in demonstrating Jesus’ historicity. Instead, the chapter focuses more on the supposedly inadequate methodologies of various sceptical Internet bloggers, which seems disingenuous as Casey should seek to refute those opponents that present the best and most comprehensive cases, as I tend to do.[321] In doing what he does, Casey does not appear to have full confidence in the soundness of his case. He goes on to include a bizarre objection to the technically correct claim that the Gospels are not actually primary sources.[322]

It is as if Casey is not aware – again, this is History 101 – that primary sources are contemporary with the events described and/or are compiled by eyewitnesses. It is accepted by ALL scholars – believers and non-believers alike – that the sources about Jesus are not contemporary, and it is accepted by most secular scholars that the relevant authors are not eyewitnesses. Casey himself acknowledges that the Gospel authors were not eyewitnesses.[323] It is already becoming difficult to accept that Casey could consider himself a historian. He ought to argue that primary sources are unnecessary here (which is a tough task given how crucial they are to historians), not that we actually have them. He should admit that we lack primary sources, and try to argue for the reliability of the *secondary* sources that scholars currently have access to.

Discussing a claim about late dates for the Gospels made by amateur[324] author Acharya S, Casey asserts that “mythicists try to date the Gospels as late as possible”.[325] This too is nothing more than a lie, [326] as the examples of Carrier and I (we accept the mainstream dating of the Epistles and the Gospels) attest, and it is actually Casey who is at odds with the consensus view by opting for radically early dates, as we shall see. So not only is Casey, once again, mischaracterising mythicists, he is overlooking the fact that he is the pot calling the kettle black. In a section on dating the synoptic Gospels, Casey continues to rail against the likes of

amateurs like ‘Blogger Godfrey’ and Acharya S, and notes his own reliance on a ‘special’ type of source.[327]

> Our earliest source, the Gospel of Mark, is also full of peculiarities which are due to his use of sources which were written in Aramaic, the language of Jesus and all of his earliest followers… This is one of many pieces of evidence that parts of Mark’s Gospel were translated from Aramaic sources.[328]

That didn’t take long. Just like Ehrman, Casey places great importance on hypothetical sources, and partly argues for them on the basis of mistakes caused by the supposedly poor translating skills of the Gospel authors.[329] That is worth repeating. Casey relies on sources that *do not exist*, and apparently, that is perfectly acceptable to New Testament historians. Once again, a mainstream scholar tries to resolve the question over whether Jesus existed, by utilising sources whose existence is even more questionable. From this, an oddity of historicist argumentation needs illuminating, and repeating, as often as possible: sources that do not exist are claimed to be reliable, while the sources that scholars actually have access to are acknowledged as being filled with errors and obvious fictions.

Surely if the existing sources can be doubted on account of their linguistic errors, obvious historical fictions, and mythical claims, the hypothetical sources can also be questioned, and more so. It also seems to be an inconsistent approach, in that the sources that cannot be verified and may not have existed at all somehow provide good evidence for the existence of the Historical Jesus, but they could not possibly provide good evidence for the existence of the Biblical Jesus (hence my assertion that Christians should be applauding my work here), or the fact that the earliest Christians believed in a purely Celestial Jesus (which means no Jesus at all, to us secularists).

These imaginary sources may have even included an admission that what follows is pure fiction, and is intended to entertain. Or perhaps these non-existing sources were not originally about Jesus; like, for example, an Old Testament targum. Note also that Casey’s references to these errors in Mark are ironically counter-productive to his case as it raises further doubts as to Mark’s reliability. The irony lost on him, Casey wants us to

trust an author who makes error after error. Indeed, Casey constantly mentions the canonical Gospels' *errors* in a chapter ironically entitled 'The date and reliability of the canonical Gospels'.

Casey then defends against the problem of Paul: that the great Apostle should have provided more details about the historical Jesus, and that this, coupled with the earlier dating of Paul's Epistles, should support the mythicist view. Casey's response is simply that Paul did not need to, making no attempt to argue for which hypothesis best explains this evidence.[330] That Paul did not have to talk about the Earthly Jesus' actions and sayings is technically correct, but it is surprising (and thus improbable if Jesus was historical), and does not somehow elevate the historical reliability of the Pauline Epistles. An objective scholar might wonder if Paul's silence over the Historical Jesus is more likely on the hypothesis that Jesus recently walked the Earth, or on the hypothesis that Jesus was a purely celestial being. But apparently such considerations are unimportant; we should simply accept the traditional account, generally portrayed in the Gospels, which are the *later* documents, and which all non-Christians agree are pretty awful. Sadly, Casey finds yet more ways to cause us to scratch our heads:

> Another major problem is created by mythicists from what is *not* said in the New Testament epistles, of which the most important at this point are those of Paul. Having dated the synoptic Gospels ludicrously late, some mythicists turn Paul's genuine epistles into our earliest sources for the life and teaching of Jesus. If Paul is taken to be a real Christian writing relatively early, this may seem at first sight to be a major problem, because his epistles say very little about Jesus.[331]

Herein is included the odd statement that in apparently late-dating the Gospels, "some mythicists turn Paul's genuine epistles into our earliest sources for the life and teaching of Jesus". They are our earliest sources! It is actually the mainstream view of Biblical scholars (recall Bart Ehrman's thoughts), and not just "some mythicists" (another oddity, as it could be expected that all mythicists would agree on this), that Paul's Epistles are indeed the earlier documents. Also, in a chapter seemingly dedicated to historical methods, Casey strangely forgot to properly describe – let alone adequately develop – his own. Moving on from this underwhelming and bewildering discussion of 'method' (contrast this with Carrier who wrote a

whole book on his method, before attempting to answer the question of Jesus' historicity),[332] Casey then attempts to argue for the early dating and the reliability of the Gospels.

Why the Gospels Ought to Be Trusted, but Only When We Feel like It

As evidenced by his third chapter, 'The date and reliability of the canonical Gospels', Casey's 'case' for the historical Jesus largely revolves around his arguing for Mark's and Matthew's gospels to be dated earlier. How that helps is left relatively unclear. After all, many fictions are contemporaneous. And I would much rather prefer a source hundreds of years removed from the subject, so long as it was transmitted unmolested, and created by a credible historian, rather than a contemporaneous source by someone who makes wildly implausible claims and fails to even grace us with her/his name! He again draws attention to Acharya S' supposedly late dating of the gospels, as if she spoke for all mythicists, and as if all Jesus sceptics required such late dates.[333] This may be to soften the impact of his own radical, extreme early dating, compared to the traditional dates accepted by most scholars.[334]

This is no small point, as historicists tend to delight in noting how fringe mythicist views are. Mythicists lack scholarly support, and yet here is Casey also departing from the precious consensus, acting as lone wolf in arguing for far earlier Gospel composition dates than is usual – even among many Christian scholars. Casey surprisingly and disturbingly claims that "the criteria reasonably used by historians writing about important political figures such as Julius Caesar need modification in dealing with the historicity of Jesus", which may partially explain his unorthodox dating methods, and somewhat explains why Historical Jesus researchers lean on their increasingly-maligned Criteria of Authenticity. [335] When given free license to alter the methods and what is considered sound historical research, one could easily argue that we have good evidence for the existence of Bigfoot. In one brief statement, which echoes many revealing quotations about the state of Biblical scholarship that we shall later consider, Casey highlights just what is wrong with the methods of Jesus historicists.[336] This also aligns well with his earlier statement about the differences between ancient history and modern history:

> This naturally included a proper elementary training in *Ancient* History, which is more directly relevant to understanding the origins of Christianity than modern history, which rightly has different standards for basic points such as how well events and people are attested.[337]

Rather than simply acknowledging the uncertainty that results when applying the best methods to the available sources, Casey and his allies redefine what good historical methodology is, so that they can arrive at the conclusion they desire; essentially that Jesus' historical existence is unquestionably certain. They happily create the sources that confirm their views, so why not also do the same with the methods? Now without explaining why an earlier date is decisive (Mark's Gospel is typically believed to have been written in the early 70s CE), Casey begins his argument for Mark's reliability by uncritically accepting some of the traditions associated with Mark's gospel, such as the author being named Mark, because it was a popular name at the time:

> Some aspects of this tradition must be true, but not all of them. First, the author was certainly Mark. Our name Mark is the Greek *Markos* without its ending, and this is the Greek form of the Latin *Marcus*, one of the commonest names in the Roman Empire. [338]

It can barely be believed that a specialist historian would make such an unsophisticated – and let's be honest, silly – argument. Any honest scholar should feel a bit guilty at having 'work' such as this published. If this is what constitutes good method, it seems unlikely that Casey's case for Jesus' historicity could possibly be convincing, to anyone who doesn't share the same presuppositions. And never mind that we don't know anything else about this 'Mark' other than her or his first name; apparently knowledge of the still unknown author's Christian name is convincing enough. To hell with qualifications and intentions!

Part of why scholars tend to date Mark's gospel around the 70s CE is because of Mark's/Jesus' presaging the Temple's destruction. As secularists, we don't believe in divine prophecy, so tend to assume that the tale was constructed this way, retroactively. Casey's key point is his belief that Mark's prophecy about the Temple is *inaccurate*, so that it could not have been written after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE.[339] Even if

correct, he overlooks the possibility that such a prophecy was made in the context of the First Jewish-Roman War, which began in 66 CE, and also ignores the possibility that Mark simply made another error, to add to the many Casey had already identified. Assuming against the consensus of even the mainstream Biblical scholars that Mark must significantly pre-date the events of 70 CE, Casey mentions the possibility that Mark's supposed prophecy of the Temple's destruction "might" have been inspired by "the Caligula crisis of 39 CE".[340] This is an absurd notion, as Mark mentions "wars and rumors of wars", and also says that "the gospel must first be preached to all nations", none of which occurred around the 40s CE.[341]

Suddenly moving forward with the truth of this possibility assumed, a popular tactic of Christian apologists and ignorant people in general, Casey somehow settles on "c. 40 CE", despite his own supplied range being 39-70 CE.[342] This could scarcely be misquoted. First, Casey clearly sets his upper limit:

> This is sufficient to exclude the latest dates proposed for the composition of Mark's Gospel, but it does not tell us *how long* before 70 CE it was written.[343]

Casey then immediately sets his lower limit:

> At this point it becomes important that a quite different event might have inspired these predictions: the Caligula crisis of 39 CE.[344]

So how does Casey settle on "c. 40 CE"? He doesn't say. It is, like his method, inexplicable. Particularly as he was so forthright in indicating that we may not know "*how long* before 70 CE". Why not 41 CE or 45 CE? Could it have been 55CE or 59 CE? What if it was 69 CE? With Paul writing as early as the 50s CE, this would not make Mark pre-Pauline, so Casey conjures up "c. 40 CE". This is scholarship? His appealing to mere possibilities and twisting of the evidence is not only unbecoming of a respected scholar, but it also makes him appear like the Christian fundamentalists he loathes – quite ironic given that he earlier portrayed mythicists as being or being like fundamentalists. Incredibly, Casey reveals the inadequacy of these assumptions by noting that there were "continued Jewish fears that a later emperor would repeat Caligula's

threat".[345] Furthermore, despite being so sure of his dates, he then seems to disclose his uncertainty over the key assumptions in arriving at those dates:

> The whole discourse *could* therefore have been written at the time of the Caligula crisis, when the threat of his statue being set up in the Temple was a real one, Jewish opposition to it might well lead to the destruction of the Temple, and Christians hoped that Jesus would return in triumph.[346]

Casey also feels that "Mark's view of the Law fits in perfectly with such a date", as apparently the knowledge of the Jewish Law would have become "increasingly improbable as time went on."[347] Ignoring the odd latter claim, it seems that Casey has forgotten his own argument that Mark had access to *earlier* Aramaic sources, which could easily explain why Mark apparently gets so much right. Casey then raises the possibility that he is wrong on account of the Gentile influence in Mark's gospel, but dismisses this possible objection by asserting that the "Gentile mission began early."[348] His sole support for this seems to be… Paul.[349] The very author whose documents are rendered less important by Casey's imaginary sources and revisionist dating. This all seems so illogical and unreasonable, particularly for such a respected scholar who had had the benefit of decades of experience.

Interestingly, this composition date would still yield a secondary source (with Jesus traditionally seen as having died around 30 CE) and would only somewhat alleviate 'the problem of Paul' (many scholars recognise the differences between the Jesus of the Epistles and the Jesus of the Gospels). After all, even if not the earliest, the epistles would still, if mythicist interpretations are correct, demonstrate that very early Christians believed about Jesus in ways that would seem impossible if Jesus had actually lived and taught on Earth just a few years earlier. Not content to go against the grain, and reason, in dating Mark's gospel so early, Casey's attempts to date Matthew fare no better. He typically starts off with some bold claims that are completely devoid of evidentiary support:

> That some of the so-called 'Q' material and some material special to Matthew was written by one of the Twelve explains the presence of perfectly accurate material.[350]

Casey also finds the time to indulge in a spot of circular reasoning:

> For example, Mark has Jesus predict 'that there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they have seen the kingdom of God come in power' (Mk 9.1). Matthew edited this so that Jesus predicted that they would not taste death 'until they have seen the Son of man coming in his kingdom' (Mt. 16.28). This makes absolutely clear the church's view that Jesus predicted his own second coming. Matthew has, however, retained the notion that some of the people present with Jesus at the time would see the event which Jesus predicted. This makes much better sense c. 50-60 CE, when eschatological expectation was extremely vigorous, than after the fall of Jerusalem, when most of the people present during the historic ministry were dead.[351]

If only Casey were not so hasty. Apart from this odd wording or reasoning – he says "most of" instead of "all of" – completely invalidating his argument, we must consider how it is that he knows when the first generation of Christians "were dead". Casey is of course incorporating 'facts' about early Christianity that he only knows by assuming the basic account of the Gospels to be true; this, like the very existence of Jesus, is the very thing that is doubted by mythicists and agnostics. This is akin to the believer thinking that every word of the Bible is true, because God wrote it, with the Bible proclaiming God's existence and general awesomeness. Casey's brazen attitude here also makes a mockery of the great uncertainties pertaining to scholarly understandings of the early Christianities. It seems that, when it suits them, Jesus historicists are happy to go along with the traditional/religious view; which they usually denigrate whenever they are not dogmatically asserting Jesus' historicity.

As with Mark, a date range for Matthew's composition is supplied. First, the upper limit:

> All this entails a date before 70 CE…[352]

And his lower limit:

> This makes much better sense c. 50-60 CE…[353]

The supplied date range is thus 50-70 CE, with Casey unable to resist temptation in inexplicably declaring:

> … makes perfect sense c. 50 CE.[354]

Just as confusing, soon after Casey backpedals a little, by allowing a composition date for Matthew that could make it post-date at least some of Paul's writings:

> I conclude that the Gospel of Matthew is a major source for our knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus, written c. 50-60 CE.[355]

Once again, it is unclear how, in a positive case, this earlier dating helps prove Jesus' historicity, without some thorough argumentation as to the Gospels' reliability. After all, these dates still leave enough time for the mixture of myth and history (or fictitious history) in the Gospels that both 'minimal historicity' and 'minimal mythicism' hypotheses would predict. Casey even criticises many of Matthew's claims, noting that Luke rejected them for being too implausible,[356] which is also quite strange as Luke's gospel also contains many implausible natural and supernatural claims! It is further known that mythical exaggerations and outright deceptions can be contemporaneous. For example, I, Raphael Lataster, teacher of (secular) Religious Studies, walked on water earlier today, and you can quote me on that. Note how this embellishment of my life story did not take several decades after my death to appear. Perversely, my miraculous claim comes from a primary source (this very book), so that the evidence for this is in many ways far superior to the miraculous and even mundane claims made about Jesus.

Moving on, Casey leaves Luke's conventional dating of "c. 80-90 CE" intact,[357] but comes again to some bold conclusions, without any convincing evidence, and by inconsistently handling claims made by later Christians:

> Early church tradition is unanimous in supposing that this Gospel was written by Luke, a companion of Paul, who was not present during the historical ministry of Jesus. This part of church tradition should be accepted, because it is soundly based in the primary source material.[358]

Casey also bewilderingly surmises that Luke, who fails to identify himself, is “an outstanding historian by ancient standards”, without any reasoning whatsoever, humorously repeating the claim verbatim on the following page prefaced with an “as noted above”,[359] and seemingly – and temporarily, given that he is an atheist who usually disparages the Gospels – ignoring the many supernatural claims found in Luke’s gospel. Interestingly, while as a secularist he rejects the veridicality of the supernatural claims found throughout the Gospels, he is also critical enough to realise that at least some of the mundane or non-supernatural material is also untrue, as revealed by his brief discussion of implausible events such as Matthew’s massacre of the innocents:

> Critical scholars have known for years that these stories are not literally true.[360]

Casey also overlooks the fact that Luke makes much use of a document that does not seem to be a historical biography (Mark; this shall be explained later) and does not name herself, or any of his/her sources, or display critical methodology, which is what other ancient authors had done; one example being Philostratus (who by Casey’s reasoning must have thus been the greatest historian of all time) with his critical writings on the possibly-legendary Apollonius. His glowing endorsement of Luke’s suitability for the role historian is somewhat contradicted by Casey’s later acknowledgements that Luke fabricated parts of his gospel, and that some (even non-supernatural) elements of it are implausible. Some examples:

> Luke knew all that was wrong. When he made up or inherited his birth accounts, he had the angel Gabriel…[361]

> Carpenter’s list of what is supposed to have happened includes Luke’s story of Jesus being sent by Pilate to Herod and then back again (Lk. 23.6-12). This need not have taken as long as Carpenter liked to imagine, but it is written completely in Luke’s style and, like much of the proceedings before Pilate, it is historically not altogether plausible.[362]

Bizarrely, the latter quotation intends to defend the Gospel against the common charge that too much happens in such a short timeframe, though Casey’s solution actually condemns it. As for the reliability of these documents, like Ehrman, Casey offers virtually nothing apart from his deference to hypothetical sources, and mysteriously leaps from his

possibly fallacious identification of Aramaic sources, to "authentic material", as if Jesus and his followers were the only Aramaic-speakers in first-century Judaea:

> Thus this is a perfect example of authentic material, literally translated from Aramaic, transmitted to us by Luke alone. Who originally wrote it down we do not know, but it was someone who had access to authentic material which they wrote down briefly…[363]

All logic has been thrown out the window. Perhaps we should accept the historicity of *Journey to the West*'s Sun Wukong[364] because he spoke Chinese. And again, imaginary sources. Need I say more? How it can possibly be known that this is authentic material stemming from a reliable source, and just why the person who "originally wrote it down" can be trusted to transmit it accurately (the same applies to 'Luke') is left unexplained. Casey even admits that "we do not know" who "originally wrote it down" which should have had him reacting with far more suspicion. It could have been a well-known fiction author writing anonymously or under a pseudonym, like Richard Bachman,[365] or the village idiot.

Given his, and Ehrman's, fondness for imaginary sources, it is über-hypocritical and extraordinary that Casey later censures a mythicist for also speculating about hypothetical sources, particularly when the hypothetical source in question is accepted by numerous historicists, such as Bart Ehrman:

> The most extraordinary form of this argument goes in from what is not found in 'Q', or even in a given 'layer' of 'Q'. For this purpose, Doherty has taken over Kloppenborg's version of these entirely hypothetical documents, so he has drawn dramatic conclusions from the absence of things from 'documents' which did not exist until modern scholars invented them.[366]

> The remaining arguments were due to Doherty's determination to believe in 'Q'. This is quite ironical, since this is a mythical document which has never existed, and Doherty used it as a plank for asserting that Jesus was a mythical being who never existed.[367]

I have run out of words to describe the astonishing nature of Casey's approach, so I must resort to common parlance: facepalm. An additional 'layer' of irony is provided in that Casey is once again veering away from

the consensus view, this time regarding Q's existence (I happen to agree with him that there is no good reason to accept a Q source), and criticises a 'fringe' mythicist for holding to a *mainstream* view. Now why is it that historicists like Casey and Ehrman can invent the sources they lack and so desperately desire, and mythicists cannot? This double standard continues later, when Casey surprisingly criticises Doherty for seeing early sources in older ones: "This predating of selected parts of a text from the third century CE shows a total lack of historical sense."[368] And again, why is it assumed that hypothetical sources happen to support the theories of the historicists, and not those of the mythicists? All this is inexplicable, apart from the obvious conclusion that this is an insular and parochial field that operates very differently from the rest of the Academic world. The crucial chapter on the Gospels concludes:

> It follows from these points that there was a historical Jesus, and that we have a significant amount of information about him. I turn next to what the Gospels do *not* say, another matter which has assumed too much importance in the work of the mythicists. [369]

Note how Casey's case for the Historical Jesus in this all-important chapter ended with nary a comment on the Gospel of John. This is fair enough, since scholars on both sides of the debate tend to ignore it, on account of its being late, derivative, and highly theological.[370] Casey later describes John as "the latest and most inaccurate of the four Gospels in the New Testament" and notes that it includes "a lot of obviously secondary material".[371] Whilst I can only agree, it does seem quite inconsistent and arbitrary to lay such charges against John's gospel, when the other canonical gospels are also historically inaccurate, derivative, and ultimately unreliable.

So thus ends Casey's case for the Historical Jesus. All he had done is argue – or rather, claim – that the Gospels of Mark and Matthew are older than is commonly thought, and that they ultimately derive from hypothetical Aramaic sources that we are apparently just supposed to assume were accurate and reliable. Just as with his discussion of his 'method', there is little presented here that is coherent, let alone convincing. If this is the best that the mainstream historicists can do, then

agnosticism over the Historical Jesus should surely be an easily justifiable position.

After the Case

With Casey deciding that the case for Jesus has now been decisively made, his attention turns to various claims made by Jesus mythicists. The first concerns the genre of the Gospels:

> The most basic point is made by Harpur, when he says that the Gospels 'are not biographies at all', in terms which mean in effect that they are not modern biographies, as critical scholars have known for years.[372]

This is a critical charge indeed. If the Gospels are not biographies, what genre do they belong to? Do they even intend to accurately transmit authentic historical information, or are they mere allegories or entertaining fictions? Casey's solution is typical. Rather than doing his own analysis, or deferring to an uncommitted ancient historian, he briefly appeals to a Christian authority that he happens to agree with, taking their word 'as gospel':

> More recent scholarship has, however, considered them in the light of ancient lives (*Bioi*, or *vitae*) of people, and the complete appropriateness of this has been established by the outstanding work of Richard Burridge. Burridge has shown that all four canonical Gospels fit within the rather broad parameters of ancient lives of people.[373]

That's it. Never mind that, while influential in the field, Burridge's conclusions are rejected by numerous scholars. Never mind that Burridge is a Christian and thus has every motive for seeing the Gospels as biographies. Never mind that there are astounding differences between Burridge's *bioi* samples and the Gospels, such as the latter documents being written by anonymous authors who fail to name their sources or display any criticism. Never mind that there is great disagreement over the genre of Mark, the crucial first gospel that the later ones utilise. Never mind that *bios* means 'life' while the crucial Gospel of Mark is not actually interested in Jesus' life.[374]

Never mind that Casey would still have to explain why he rejects numerous crucial sections of these 'biographies' while asserting others to

be unquestionable truths. Never mind the oddity that similarities between Christianity and earlier and pagan religions are considered unimportant[375] while alleged similarities between Christian documents and pagan documents are apparently crucial.[376] Burridge says the Gospels are biographies, so the question is apparently settled.[377] That Casey dedicates only this small passage to such a monumentally crucial issue, whilst dedicating almost an entire chapter to arguing for earlier source dates that are not so relevant, is preposterous.

In another ironic twist, possibly caused by his ignorance over Burridge's work, Casey also takes the time to criticise (unwittingly?) one of Burridge's key examples of *bioi*: Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, which is about a character very much like Jesus.[378] According to Casey, "his account is in general wildly legendary" and "it is clear from sober scholarship that it cannot be relied upon except for a few very basic points."[379] Like the Gospels? It should be very clear now, the privilege Christianity enjoys in Western academia, particularly as Casey poo poos Philostratus' work while simultaneously praising Luke as an outstanding historian. And that is despite the fact that Philostratus' account of Apollonius is vastly superior to any of the Gospels, due to factors such as: Philostratus being identified, sources being named, criticism being shown, and the work allegedly being commissioned by empress Julia Domna.

After an inadvertently humorous section wherein he attempts to argue that his imaginary sources are better than Earl Doherty's imaginary sources,[380] Casey attempts to address the common mythicist charge that Paul would have written more about the Historical Jesus if Paul really thought of him as somebody that recently lived on Earth. Casey essentially argues that as early Christians supposedly lived in a "high context culture", Paul could safely assume that most of them already knew much about Jesus' sojourn on Earth.[381] This reveals Casey's Gospel-tainted glasses. He assumes that the Gospels are largely true, and overlooks the possibility that they are actually adapting the story that Paul provides. This is somewhat understandable, given his (fallacious) attempts to date Mark and Matthew earlier, when most scholars recognise Paul's writings as the earliest Christian sources. Casey actually acknowledges his relying on the Gospels in interpreting Paul:

> Finally, it will be noted that my discussion depends on the points established in Chapter 3. There is real information about the historical Jesus available from the synoptic Gospels, which enables critical scholars to sort out to a significant degree which traditions are true and which are secondary development.[382]

If only his case for the Gospels' reliability was not effectively entirely based on apparently early composition dates and the supposed certainty afforded them by imaginary sources.

Unfortunately, Casey offers little reason why we should accept Paul's claims, and conveniently fails to highlight that every time Paul mentions his source, it is God or the Celestial Jesus, directly (via revelation) or indirectly (via the Jewish scriptures). Casey tries to brush this off by saying that Jews often claimed that traditions came "from the Lord", wherein he cites himself (with that reference again citing himself…), which uncritically ignores the fact that these should then still be considered unreliable sources to the non-believer.[383] To the secularist, these claims of divine revelations necessitate that Paul was either a liar, mentally ill, or otherwise treated hallucinations or dreams as veridical. Kind of a big deal. Paul not only claimed divine sources, but also explicitly ruled out human sources.[384] Casey self-servingly brushes this off too, as "an exception", despite the fact that it is part of a common and unbroken theme throughout Paul's epistles.[385] Paul never refers to human sources, mentioning only divine ones. This is all especially important when we reject Casey's idiosyncratic Gospel-dating shenanigans and acknowledge that Paul is the earliest Christian author, who thus might have 'created' Christianity as we know it.

Casey then shifts focus from what is lacking in Paul's writings, to what is written in them. For example, Casey makes a fuss over Paul's knowing James/Jacob, "the brother of the Lord" (recall that Casey's Gospel-tainted glasses makes him assume Paul's familiarity with the basic Gospel story). Many mythicists maintain that this is not meant biologically and Casey even admits that that is possible.[386] Like Ehrman, Casey then stresses the handful of verses that seemingly indicate that Paul did know of a Historical Jesus, which we shall examine later.[387] One key passage, however, pretty much invalidates the entirety of Casey's 'case':

> However, Jewish people normally and ordinarily rewrote traditions in accordance with the needs of their communities, and this is what Paul did, as I showed by comparing his tradition carefully with that of Mark.[388]

Firstly, this realisation should have Casey look upon the Gospels, and his precious imaginary sources that underlie them, with far more suspicion. This also highlights the benefits of 'outsider' views (that is, outside New Testament scholarship). We Religious Studies scholars recognise that religion often has very little do with the facts as Casey here seems to realise somewhat; religion is often more about culture, community, faith-based (rather than evidence-based) belief, and ritual. Casey and his historicist scholars generally seem to have trouble comprehending that, as they unjustifiably assume that the Gospel authors, who are obviously religious, cared about, and *intended* to lay out, the historical facts. Secondly, similarities between Paul's writings and the Gospels of Mark *could* indicate that Paul adapted Mark. But it could also indicate that Mark, the later document, adapted Paul…

It is also interesting that Casey somewhat concedes the general possibility of Doherty's basic theory that early Christians believed in a purely celestial and salvific being who was killed by evil spirits, referring to earlier pagan sources (such as Xenocrates and Antiochus), but, echoing Ehrman, dismissed it as improbable as there is "no evidence that such ideas were known in Judaism".[389] This is regrettable, as we know that there were *many Judaisms*, and we also know that certain Jews often gravitated towards pagan ideas – one need only superficially glance over the Old Testament to realise this. Paul, or some predecessor (perhaps Cephas or James), may have been one such Jew, as the 'somewhat Gnostic' Philo of Alexandria was. Indeed, Paul's letters just might be the evidence of Jews/Christians believing in such. In fact, numerous mainstream scholars already recognise the influences of Hellenistic culture on Paul and the Gospel authors – it would actually seem impossible for these authors to not be influenced by Hellenism.[390]

Evidence for this sort of syncretism, as well as the notion of a Celestial Jesus, may also be available in the form of the first or second century *Ascension of Isaiah* (as we shall later discuss), which Casey dismisses for

apparently being too late and because of an 'Earthly portion' (which Carrier and I think is a later interpolation).[391] There are other evidences of such Jewish-Pagan syncretism, which Casey, somewhat contradicting himself, actually seems aware of: "Doherty correctly notes that evil spirits come into their own in the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha."[392] The views of these 'alternative' and non-canonical Jewish writers certainly did not originate in a vacuum, and obviously is evidence that not all Jews thought alike. Some Jews were obviously more receptive to outside influences than others. As discussed in the critique on Ehrman's work, even if we lacked evidence of Jewish-Pagan syncretism, we certainly could not just rule it out, particularly when we know that there is a lot we don't know; about Judaism, and most everything else. Of course, admitting our ignorance is important in all such investigations.

Casey finally turns his attentions to the much-discussed pagan parallels, which shall largely be omitted from my critique. One reason for this is that some mythicists do indeed make too much of this issue, and another is that historicists like Casey and Ehrman tend to go overboard in rejecting these parallels whole cloth. There are clear parallels, which early Christians, and Casey himself, actually admitted to (emphasis mine):

> Inanna was a vegetation goddess, which is the basic reason why she was said to have *died, descended to the underworld, and come back again. This was a symbol*… This is the central reason why *there are lots of ancient stories about more or less dying and rising deities*… many of the stories are quite different from each other… The Sumerian story of Inanna is older than Carrier claims… *Inanna had not returned after three days and three nights*…[393]

> Of course Jesus' teaching was not wholly original…[394]

> Those that have some substance show only that the Gospels are not inerrant, and Jesus was not perfectly unique. They also show that, long after Jesus' death, *Christians really did borrow some beliefs and some iconography from other religions.*[395]

Maybe they borrowed far more than Casey is prepared to admit.

Even Worse than Ehrman: Offensive and Facetious

Throughout the latter chapters of his book, confident with his unconvincing 'case' for Jesus' historical existence, Maurice Casey addressed some mythicist claims, characteristically focussing on the likes of Acharya S and 'Blogger Godfrey', with hardly a mention of Robert Price or Richard Carrier, who seemed to be the best-credentialled mythicists according to Casey's own introductory list. On Price, Casey admits in his introductory chapter that "there is no doubt that he was [*sic – Price is fortunately still with us*] more or less a qualified New Testament scholar."[396] Price, one of the few (perhaps the only) bona fide New Testament scholars that adopts a mythicist view is never again mentioned in the book with any substance, while amateurs such as Acharya S and 'Blogger Godfrey' are constantly referred to. It seems disingenuous and blatantly contradictory then, for Casey to later declare that he "cannot find any evidence that any of them have adequate professional qualifications."[397]

On Carrier, Casey essentially only mentions him again late in the book when discussing Christianity's apparent parallels with earlier religions, something which Carrier does not focus on much (unlike some other mythicists), which is even obvious in the quotations supplied by Casey. [398] Again, there is something disingenuous about an approach that avoids what may be the best and most convincing agnostic or mythicist arguments, in order to focus on what would seemingly be the low-hanging fruit. Contrast that with my critiquing Ehrman and Casey on this issue (and William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne on God's existence), rather than some unsophisticated Christian bloggers, and serious questions must be raised about the viability of Casey's case for the Historical Jesus.

Nor is there real engagement with the more nuanced agnostic position, held by the likes of Hector Avalos, Stephen Law, Richard Dawkins, and myself. Kurt Noll could also be described as being agnostic on the matter.

[399] We can also add Art Droge to the list – we'll discuss his work in more detail later. While generally dismissing what may be some of the worst mythicist approaches, such as an overeager attitude to identify similarities between Christianity and earlier religions, Casey barely touches upon Earl Doherty's promising hypothesis of Paul's Jesus being entirely celestial (with the later Gospels elaborating). He poses some challenges to Doherty's thesis, but this falls short of a comprehensive comparative analysis of the plausibilities of his and Doherty's theories, including a survey of all the relevant background knowledge,[400] which is effectively what Richard Carrier has since successfully completed.

It should be highlighted – particularly in light of Casey's negative portrayals of mythicists and their work – that his own book is a rather unpleasant and distasteful read. Typographical errors abound, rudimentary errors are frequent, self-citation is common, the structure is disjointed, and some sections are wholly unscholarly and unnecessarily offensive, as well as vulgar.[401] Mary is described as having been "preggers",[402] rugby games are referred to as "rugger games",[403] *bona fide* scholar Thomas L. Thompson is disrespectfully described as a ''scholar'' (quotation marks included),[404] and 'criticising' is replaced with "slagging off".[405] He referred to Robert Price and Frank Zindler as "atheists", in a seemingly derogatory fashion, though there is nothing wrong in simply being an atheist, and Casey was an atheist himself.[406]

Casey also horrifyingly finds time to highlight one critic's being "a gay anti-Christian socialist", as if sexual orientation or politics has any relevance to trustworthiness or the soundness of an argument.[407] (Nonetheless, I must admit that I personally do not feel that 'straight Christian capitalists' like George W. Bush are particularly trustworthy.) Even some of Casey's less bigoted and repulsive remarks seem completely unnecessary in what should be a serious and sober treatment of the evidence:

> As the most outstanding blogger, also a proper scholar of a decent cricketing nation, said of another atheist, 'Once a fundie always a fundie. He's just batting for the other side now.'[408]

What is the point of mentioning whether a scholar comes from a "decent cricketing nation" or not? Does the latter increase the chances of sound and objective research? Are we to take it that the likes of Dan Barker, Hector Avalos, Richard Carrier, and Bart Ehrman are somehow lesser because they hail from the United States of America, a country not so well known for its cricketing achievements?[409] And am I even more capable than he, of sound and objective research, because I hail from a country whose cricket team regularly embarrasses Casey's?[410] Humour should be welcomed in academic writing, but most of Casey's attempts are simply too crude and mean-spirited (and often 'anti-American'), if they are intended to be humorous at all. I find it astounding that such comments are in a scholarly book, which has been subject to some form of peer-review, and has been edited. It is as if one needs only a big name and to toe the party line to get published, while the quality of research is only of secondary importance.

In sum, Casey's *Jesus* does not describe a practical historical method, offers nothing convincing regarding Jesus' historicity, is otherwise an embarrassment to the Academy, and its only saving grace resides in demonstrating the desperate measures and lack of success of Jesus historicists' attempts to end the growing tide of Jesus skepticism. Rather than being fearful of what this respected authority had to say, Jesus mythicists will likely treasure this gift, this affirmation of the woeful methods and arguments used by the more conventional historicist scholars. In the wake of Ehrman's book and his *coup de grâce* that is the hypothetical source, I did not expect that a poorer case for the historical Jesus could have been put forth by a reputable academic. I was wrong. At least in that sense, Maurice Casey has exceeded all expectations; an unwanted achievement, to be sure. While relying on the same non-existent sources, he makes even more unsubstantiated claims, delights in needlessly criticising additional non-experts, and also manages to degrade historical Jesus scholarship to new levels of incompetence and vulgarity.

With constant mischaracterisations, *ad hominem* argumentation, homophobic and unprofessional language, and easily avoided errors, questions must surely be raised as to the confidence Casey had in his case for Jesus' historicity. We should surely have expected a simple and

straightforward explanation of the evidence and how wonderful it is. I suspect that it is the fact that the latter is not realisable, which partially explains the unnecessary embellishments. It is worth noting that Casey focussed almost exclusively on the Gospels, and was seemingly uninterested in the extrabiblical sources – one of the very few positive aspects of the book. As we shall soon see, the most promising case for Jesus' historicity must necessarily rely on the Gospels, whether they are good sources or not. Ehrman effectively agreed with Casey on this, though not without some contradiction.

Nevertheless, I hope it is now exceedingly obvious, that the case for the Historical Jesus is disconcertingly scant. The Jesus historicists must certainly only appeal to the consensus, create their own methods, try to discredit their critics, and rely on sources that do not exist to prop up the horrible sources that do, simply because they lack what they truly need: good evidence. If they had it, they would let it speak for itself. We shall end with something that you are probably sick of hearing by now, though I shall repeat it until everyone in the world is aware of it, or I have drawn my last breath. Imaginary sources cannot a convincing case make. If they existed at all, they could easily argue for alternative conclusions. Nobody can verify that they do not.

With the claims about the reliability of the sources from these major historicists now out of the way, I shall proceed to eliminate any inkling of rational thought that we are in possession of good evidence for the existence of the Historical Jesus.

3. THE CASE FOR AGNOSTICISM: LATASTER

Introduction

The recent defences of Jesus' historicity by Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey lack lucid and competent methodologies, rely on highly questionable documents, and further make use of sources that no longer exist, if they ever did. They are polemical, occasionally vulgar, and often resorted to cavilling, focussing on tangential arguments of the more amateurish mythicists. They failed miserably, and this may have something to do with my introductory thoughts on just what sort of scholar should be investigating the issue. The failure of the self-styled experts seems to justify agnosticism, yet there is still much more to be said.[411] My own case for Historical Jesus agnosticism is primarily grounded in skepticism over the relevant sources that is necessitated by sound historical approaches, and has actually been well received by several critical scholars.

Of course, within Judeo-Christian Biblical scholarship, the idea that Jesus didn't exist is controversial and is not supported by the majority of academics. Professor of Divinity James Dunn describes the mythical Jesus theory as a "thoroughly dead thesis."[412] Christian apologist Gary Habermas says that "very few scholars hold the view that Jesus never lived."[413] In an interview, Bart Ehrman said:

> This is an old argument, even though it shows up every 10 years or so. This current craze that Christianity was a mystery religion like these other mystery religions – the people who are saying this are almost always people who know nothing about the mystery religions; they've read a few popular books, but they're not scholars of mystery religions. The reality is, we know very little about mystery religions – the whole point of mystery religions is that they're secret! So I think it's crazy to build on ignorance in order to make a claim like this. I think the evidence is just so overwhelming that Jesus existed, that it's silly to talk about him not existing. I don't know anyone who is a responsible historian, who is actually trained in the historical method, or anybody who is a biblical scholar who does this for a living, who gives any credence at all to any of this.[414]

In a later article, whilst sidestepping the possibility of more nuanced Jesus agnostics such as myself, Ehrman essentially compares Jesus mythicists with Holocaust-deniers and "six-day creationists", implying

that mythicists are irrational and ignore the evidence.[415] There are various ahistoricity theories, but the central idea is that the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth is not supported by reliable evidence; thus Jesus could well be an entirely mythical (i.e. fictitious) figure. The self-styled experts disagree, asserting that Jesus definitely existed, but there exist many different scholarly opinions on who exactly the Historical Jesus was. Jesus has been variously described as a charismatic healer, a Stoic philosopher, a wise sage, an apocalyptic prophet, a failed revolutionary, and by many other descriptions.

Many modern scholars may accept that the Jesus of history is far removed from the Biblical Jesus, but they maintain nonetheless that Jesus did exist as a real, flesh-and-blood, human being, who lived on Earth.[416] Many Biblical scholars spend their careers trying to distil the 'real' Jesus from the Biblical texts. They maintain that while the story of Jesus Christ may have been embellished, there is indeed a historical core behind it. I propose that even this 'stripped-down' Biblical Jesus has no real historical basis. I acknowledge the possibility that there was no Jesus of Nazareth, nor was there a need for one; that Jesus, even minus the miracles, is an entirely fictitious character. That such theorising may be troubling to Christian believers, atheistic Jesus historicists, and even Muslims (Jesus is a major prophet in the Quran, being mentioned many more times by name than Muhammad), is irrelevant.[417] We are simply interested in the truth, and wish to get as close to it as possible.

As earlier explained, the existence of a historical Jesus is simply assumed by most. The *Jesus Seminar*, for example, is a major scholarly effort by numerous academics, whose main aim is to try and determine what teachings commonly ascribed to Jesus are genuine.[418] While this group may develop images of Jesus far removed from the miracle-working Christ of Faith, the *Jesus Seminar* does not start by asking the question, "Was there a Jesus?" It may be helpful to consider how it is that people come to know of Jesus. As the evidence and arguments of both the mythicists and those that proclaim Jesus' historicity are examined, it is clear that Jesus is not a figure of history known because of a great battle in which he slew enemies by the dozens, or because he ruled over a large empire. Most do not know of Jesus because they happen to have read all

the works of early historians and authors – such as Titus Flavius Josephus, Publius Cornelius Tacitus, or Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus – and take them at face value.

In fact, most people know of Jesus because of the historical reality of religious faith. They know of Jesus largely because of the alliance of the fourth century Emperor Constantine and the emergent Roman Catholic Church.[419] They know of Jesus because of their culture; because of the history of the Western world.[420] They know of Jesus through the Judeo-Christian Bible. They know Jesus primarily through the four canonical gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They know of Jesus largely via questionable documents that make supernatural claims,[421] and have a clear intention to evangelise.[422] That is not to assert that historians would somehow require more evidence for the existence of a historical Jesus than for other figures of history; that would be inconsistent. But it should be kept in mind that religion and mythology often make claims that contradict what is known of science and history, and often feature figures that did not literally exist.

Since Jesus is generally known through documents that make religious and supernatural claims, scholars could justifiably be suspicious over claims to Jesus' historicity. If they do not have convincing secular evidence outside of the Judeo-Christian Bible, scholars who assume Jesus' historicity (historicists) are essentially relying on emic (insider) accounts. [423] At face value, scholars might question why they ought to take the supernatural (or even more mundane) claims of a religious text seriously. Scholars often consider stories of the central figure of one religion to have a historical core, while other central or peripheral characters – of the same or other religious traditions – do not.

Analysing the Judeo-Christian Bible then becomes a task of great importance. The sources, work and methods of Biblical scholars will herein be scrutinised. While scholarship tends to agree on issues such as Jesus' historicity, there are disagreements about specific versions of Jesus, [424] and there are scholars of religion and historians, such as Hector Avalos and Richard Carrier, who condemn the methods used by mainstream Biblical scholars.[425] Given that Jesus is primarily known

through religious sources, sources that make appeals to the supernatural, it should be reasonable to question whether he existed at all. Unsurprisingly, this has frequently happened. From early groups of Christians that denied Jesus' existence in various ways, to scholars throughout history; the questioning of Jesus' historicity is not a new phenomenon.

Perhaps it has received more attention recently with the initiation of the *Jesus Project*[426] and the rise of the so-called 'New Atheism', but questions over Jesus' nature and even his existence, were asked as early as the first and second centuries.[427] It should be obvious that pointing to such theorists as being in the minority is not sufficient. The examples of Copernicus and Galileo should warn us as to the dangers of appealing to authority and appealing to the majority. Empirical, scientific and logical methods must be the test; arguments must be considered on their own merits. And some of these arguments are very meritorious indeed.

Recall that it is not necessarily true that the possibility that there may not have been a historical Jesus should be particularly controversial or impactful. For example, one could be a Christian without literally believing in the Judeo-Christian God, or a literal or earthly Jesus. One could also be uninterested in religion, yet still believe in a historical Jesus. There are various possibilities with what people may believe, and why; and this should not affect the research or reception of this historical question. Some mention must also be made of the *Jesus Project*, initiated by historian of religion, R. Joseph Hoffmann.[428] One of the reasons for the project's premature abandonment seems to have been the reluctance to continue down a line of research that could lead to serious doubt over the historicity of Jesus, with the only perceived newsworthy outcome being that he did not exist at all.[429] Hoffmann has often criticised mythicists, [430] yet also offered an honest opinion on the possibility of a non-historical Jesus:

> Do I regard the Project as worth pursuing, reviving? I think the historicity question, as I have said many times over, is an interesting one. But it is not a question that in the absence of a "real" archeological or textual discovery of indubitable quality can be answered.[431]

It certainly is an interesting question. And we shall begin our analysis by critiquing the methods of mainstream Historical Jesus researchers in general,[432] and the methods of the minority agnostics/sceptics.

Methods: The Criteria of Authenticity vs. Bayesian Reasoning

The scant sources concerning Jesus, and the multiplicity of methods presents an immediate stumbling block. There are various methods, and not all historians agree. History is arguably more of an art than a science; it is generally agreed that history cannot be definitively proven and is actually concerned with trying to determine what *probably* happened in the past.[433] A brief consideration of the reliability of documents written or compiled by fallible humans reveals that there is a substantial difference between the certainty of any historical approach and the certainty of perhaps the purest of sciences, mathematics. It can be argued that nothing in history can truly be known with absolute certainty; we should always leave room for some measure of justifiable doubt.

The question of Jesus' historicity is a historical question, not merely a theological one. As such, this is a question that can be asked without being restrained by deference to the billions who proclaim Jesus as their saviour, or the respect accorded to Christianity for its influence on Western culture, the university system, or even the field of Religious Studies. The methods used by mainstream Biblical scholars to make probabilistic claims about the historical Jesus will be scrutinised, with a major focus on the Criteria of Authenticity. And we shall not be kind to scholars that use logical fallacies. An over-reliance on scholarly opinions, rather than a direct examination of the evidence for example, might be committing the fallacy of *appealing to authority*. A conclusion not flowing from the premises presented demonstrates the fallacy of *non-sequitur*. Relying on the assertion that those who disagree are 'fringe' commits the logical fallacy of *appealing to the majority*.

Now sources of evidence used in historical research are often classified as being primary or secondary sources. Primary sources would generally be relics (such as artefacts) or testimonies (such as written documents) created by eyewitnesses (including the person in question),

contemporary to the events in question.[434] One thing that historians do seem to agree on is the importance of primary sources, which, unlike secondary sources, are direct sources of evidence. Influential nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke preferred the use of primary sources, stating that historians ought to rely more on narratives of eyewitnesses, and on genuine and original documents.[435] As primary source evidence is closer to the events in question, and presumably more reliable, primary sources are of the utmost importance to scholars investigating Jesus' historicity. It is of no small importance, that we don't have any primary sources about Jesus.

Of course, while primary sources are generally superior, they also could be affected by bias and inaccuracies. Carrier on why doubt is always a prerequisite in historical research:

> Evangelical apologist Craig Blomberg argues that one should approach all texts with complete trust unless you have a specific reason to doubt what they say (*The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 1987, pp. 240-54). No real historian is so naïve... I am not aware of any ancient work that is regarded as completely reliable. A reason always exists to doubt any historical claim. Historians begin with suspicion no matter what text they are consulting, and adjust that initial degree of doubt according to several factors, including genre, the established laurels of the author, evidence of honest and reliable methodology, bias, the nature of the claim (whether it is a usual or unusual event or detail, etc.), and so on.[436]

When it comes to a primary source (or any source), questions historians may ask to determine its usefulness may revolve around when the source was produced (date), where it was produced (localisation), by whom it was produced (authorship), the pre-existing material influencing the source (analysis), the original form of the source (integrity), and the evidential value of the source's contents (credibility).[437] Twentieth-century American historian Louis Gottschalk, in his work *Understanding History*, gives some insight into how secondary sources can be tested by the historian:

> In cases where he uses secondary witnesses, however, he does not rely upon them fully. On the contrary, he asks: (1) On whose primary testimony does the secondary witness base his statements? (2) Did the secondary witness accurately report the primary testimony as a whole? (3) If not, in what details did he accurately report the primary testimony?[438]

While the answers to these questions may not provide complete certainty as to how reliable documents are in reporting what actually happened, they do aid in determining to what extent a source could be trusted. As such, the sources used to establish a historical Jesus should be subject to these questions. It can be argued that such standards should only apply to more modern sources; that modern scholars should not have such high expectations of ancient sources. Whether ancient sources should be judged according to the standards set for more modern sources can be questioned, but the answer must ultimately be in the affirmative. The historian should be critical and consistent. The historian must accept that ancient sources may provide limitations and challenges, and not arbitrarily change what is considered to be convincing evidence, simply because it is already known that the evidence provided is not convincing.

Historians cannot lower the standards by which they measure a source's reliability, simply because they already know (due to the time period in question or for other reasons) that the source is relatively less reliable; even if this is what Biblical scholars actually do. That would be inconsistent; and its practice all but proves bias. Scholars could then proclaim any source reliable. If that means historians can say nothing of the ancient world with certainty, then so be it. No evidence is no evidence and weak evidence is weak evidence; whether historians should reasonably expect strong evidence or not. As Biblical scholar Robert Price affirms, there is no way to be certain, and scholars should not bemoan that fact. [439]

And so we come to one of the major problems when it comes to trusting the opinions of the mainstream Historical Jesus researchers. Their methods are idiosyncratic and woeful. Consider archaeologist and Biblical scholar David Noel Freedman, who once remarked:

> We have to accept somewhat looser standards. In the legal profession, to convict the defendant of a crime, you need proof beyond a reasonable doubt. In civil cases, a preponderance of the evidence is sufficient. When dealing with the Bible or any ancient source, we have to loosen up a little; otherwise, we can't really say anything.[440]

While this quotation may be taken out of context, and is not necessarily limited to the Judeo-Christian scriptures, it is interesting to see how a respectable Biblical scholar seemingly acknowledges that the evidence scholars extract from the Bible is certainly not ideal. When it comes to the canonical Gospels, and as we saw earlier, secular New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman concurs.[441] Robert M. Price also agrees, saying that using critical tools with ruthless consistency would leave scholars with complete agnosticism with regards to Jesus' historicity.[442] This somewhat echoes a Bultmannian sort of minimalism, which does not necessarily involve questioning Jesus' historicity; that while Jesus' historical existence may be certain, the state of the sources means that New Testament historians cannot truly know much more than that.[443]

(Note that minimalism – after decades of controversy – is already entrenched in scholarship concerning the books of the Old Testament, and may eventually become more widespread in New Testament research, none of which is insignificant given that the latter, and its associated claims about Jesus, draw largely from the former.[444])

There are many methods used in Biblical criticism, but of particular relevance to this project are the tools or *criteria* used in establishing authenticity with regards to the sayings and actions of the historical Jesus. John Gager identifies and criticises the circulatory methods of Biblical scholars, particularly the criteria of authenticity:

> A more serious problem is the patent circularity of the method in dealing with the Gospels. Apart from Paul, who says precious little about Jesus, the sources for our knowledge of early Christian communities are identical with the sources for the quest itself… it is difficult to see how else one might proceed responsibly to distinguish between "history" and "tradition" in the Gospels.[445]

Let's take a close look at these crucial methods.

Criteria for Authenticity

Multiple attestation: The more independent references to an event, the more likely it happened.[446] While generally a logical principle, its

use by Biblical scholars in establishing Jesus' historicity seems invalid, due to the scarcity of sources and the timelines involved. Few individual units of the Jesus tradition are multiply attested, and even then, establishing independence is extremely difficult, if not impossible.[447] The Gospels are reliant on each other (particularly on Mark) so aren't actually independent; hypothetical and non-extant sources such as *Q*, *M* and *L* (and even second and third-generation hypothetical and non-extant sources behind these sources)[448] cannot be used to determine anything with certainty; the writings of the Apostle Paul mention little about the events of Jesus' life (and could indicate a Jesus that was not recently on Earth); extra-Biblical passages appear later in the record, are disputed, and cannot be ruled out as being influenced by Mark and the other Gospels.

Gager theorises that a tradition's multiple attestation "will not establish anything beyond its early date."[449] It should also be perceived as inconsistent that mainstream secular Biblical scholars do not use this criterion to establish Jesus' resurrection, or other supernatural events. And as Richard Carrier notes, scholars cannot presume multiple independent attestation when the authors of the Gospels are anonymous, and present additional problems:

> All we have are uncritical pro-Christian devotional or hagiographic texts filled with dubious claims written decades after the fact by authors who never tell us their methods or sources. Multiple Attestation can never gain traction on such a horrid body of evidence. [450]

Embarrassment/dissimilarity: The criterion of embarrassment, along with the similar criterion of dissimilarity (sometimes known as the criterion of double dissimilarity) supposedly indicates that if a saying or event found in the Jesus story is embarrassing to Jews, early Christians (including the gospel writers), or both, it is likely to be true.[451] The idea could seem rational in the sense that it could be unlikely for a scribe or church, for example, to falsify an event or teaching that they would find embarrassing. But even at first glance, this criterion seems a little dubious and highly speculative.

Firstly, it could be possible that the author purposely provides an embarrassing or 'dissimilar' example to provide a feeling of authenticity

and credibility, avoiding suspicion over constant positive or beneficial assertions, or to make a salient point, perhaps on humility, or separation from the ego. For example, many apologists make a fuss about how embarrassing it would have been for the supposedly Jewish Gospel writers to admit that it were women who found Jesus' tomb empty (which is not even that well established). This overlooks the possibility that the Gospel writers intentionally place such importance on women, to demonstrate just how different this new religion is, including its treatment of women, and other 'downtrodden' groups. Actually, isn't that kind of the point of Christianity? Jesus apparently said that the lofty shall be humbled and the humbled shall be exalted.[452]

Similarly, Ehrman assumes that the tradition of Jesus' hailing from Nazareth is true, as "Nazareth was a tiny hamlet riddled with poverty, it is unlikely that anyone would invent the story that the messiah came from there".[453] Ehrman overlooks the possibility that this tradition emphasises humility, and perfectly illustrates Jesus' own point that 'the last will be first'. Ehrman also assumes that Jesus must have had brothers, as the Gospels' claims about Jesus' brothers do not "serve any clear-cut Christian agenda".[454] Apart from the obvious possibility of the Gospel writer merely fleshing out the story (vividness of narration, perhaps), Ehrman overlooks the importance of Jesus' physical family serving as a contrast to his proclamations about his spiritual family.[455]

Secondly, given the diversity of Jewish religions, and the diversity even of early Christianity,[456] it cannot be assumed (with the canonical Gospels at least, with their anonymous authors) that the author would find the event or teaching in question to be embarrassing. Obviously, we simply don't know what early Christians thought, apart from what is in the New Testament. And much of what we have in the New Testament doesn't actually stem from the earliest Christians. Biblical scholar Christopher Tuckett argued that "The very existence of the tradition may thus militate against its being regarded as 'dissimilar' to the views of 'the early church.'"[457]

Philosopher Stephen Law is one of a growing number of scholars that generally dismiss the authenticity criteria as applied to the Gospels, noting

that they cannot be used to establish Jesus' historicity, and could only be helpful if scholars already knew of a historical Jesus (from external sources) and were certain of some of his teachings and deeds. With regards to the criterion of embarrassment, Law mentions that it is not unheard of that a new religion would make embarrassing and untruthful claims, pointing to the fantastic and embarrassing (to modern understanding of science and history) claims of intergalactic wars made by Scientology founder, L. Ron Hubbard.[458] New Testament scholar Stanley Porter describes determining what might have been embarrassing to early Christians as "very difficult… due especially to the lack of detailed evidence for the thought of the early Church, apart from that found in the New Testament."[459]

As with Tuckett, Richard Carrier agrees that the very fact a tradition of Jesus survived (in the Gospels) is actually evidence that that traditional saying or deed is not dissimilar to what early Christians believed.[460] It does seem illogical to proclaim that a Gospel author is writing stories that contradict what early Christians believed, when the Gospel authors themselves presumably were early Christians, and among the earliest Christians on record; from which later Christians would derive their faith. Carrier also notes that any reason to *preserve* a supposedly embarrassing and truthful passage (which could have been altered or removed by over-eager scribes) would also be reason to *fabricate* the passage; indeed, that the supposedly embarrassing stories suited some purpose of these early Christians, might even point to their fabrication.[461] Gager alludes to the difficulties posed by the incomplete understanding of "the early Church":

> It may well be the case, in the words of Hooker, that "if we knew the whole truth about Judaism and the early Church, our small quantity of 'distinctive' teaching would wither away altogether."[462]

Finally, consider that if dissimilar views were always verboten, we would never observe the rise of new religions. Unless perhaps, we have an 'authentic' religion, which we can obviously overlook, as atheists (in any case, theists can recognise that not all religions are 'authentic'). The history of religion, with its constant influencing, schisms, and syncretism, seems to point to the futility of this criterion.

Before moving on, let us consider the example of Jesus Christ being baptised by the mere mortal that was John the Baptist, which is apparently embarrassing, so must have happened.[463] This, and many other passages, could again simply stress the virtue of humility (which may also eventually lead to exaltation), so could just as easily have been fabricated.[464] Similarly, Ehrman finds Jesus' gloomy prophecy in Mark 13:2 as embarrassing – and thus authentic – since the enduring Western Wall apparently proves Jesus wrong,[465] but Jesus' 'prophecy' referred to certain buildings, such as the Temple itself, which were indeed totally destroyed.

Coherence: This criterion indicates that a saying or action of Jesus is more likely to be authentic, if it coheres with other authentic sayings and actions of Jesus.[466] A clear problem with this criterion is in establishing a base of authentic sayings and actions. With a lack of primary sources, and anonymous authors for the main secondary sources of information about Jesus (the canonical Gospels), finding what is authentic about Jesus is no simple task. This criterion relies heavily on unjustified assumptions. Without a solid base of certain sayings and deeds that do stem from a historical Jesus, using this criterion would be somewhat circular and betrays a reliance on other criteria, as stated by Stanley Porter, who also notes that when it comes to the criteria for authenticity in general, "each of them seems subject to valid criticism".[467]

Nor is it impressive if sources that could borrow and evolve from each other show signs of 'coherence'. It is obvious that coherence can be fabricated, especially when the documents in question are separated in time, often by decades. Gager also criticises this criterion, alluding to the "floodgate" of improbable claims that are consistent with other information:

> To allow a saying that is simply consistent with or does not contradict another saying is to open a floodgate, for the range of such a criterion is virtually limitless.[468]

Vividness of narration: A story's vivid details could supposedly offer the Gospels some verisimilitude; that is, they may indicate them to be, or be based on, authentic eyewitness reports.[469] This is very speculative,

with Biblical New Testament scholar Craig A. Evans calling it “dubious”.[470] A genuine report could be very brief, and it could be unnecessarily long, depending on the eyewitness; there is a potential issue here, with the gospels having anonymous authors.[471] A fictitious report could also be brief, or exhaustively detailed. J. R. R. Tolkien’s decades long work on his *Middle-Earth* saga[472] for example, whilst providing entertaining stories for novels and films, does not prove that the One Ring that ruled them all was indeed destroyed, or that certain sayings really did originate with a historical King Aragorn, Bilbo Baggins, Samwise the Brave, or Gandalf the Grey; in fact vividness would be expected of fiction.

Nor should we assume that because the *Harry Potter* books are so vividly described, that some elements of it, such as Harry’s early and depressing life in London,[473] must be historically accurate. It is also the case (as with historical fictions) that historical facts are added to fictional tales. Similarly, non-historical facts may be added over time; Ehrman himself seems comfortable with this notion, as applied to the Gospels.[474] With Ehrman admitting to the layers of embellishment on the Gospels, it is a wonder why he would find his imaginary sources approach to be so reliable, and why he would rule out that the Gospel authors themselves had been doing all of the embellishing.

This criterion also directly contradicts the criterion of **least distinctiveness**, which indicates that brief and less-detailed passages are more likely to be authentic. If less vivid and more vivid descriptions *both* point to authentic deeds and sayings, scholars could ‘authenticate’ any aspect about any Jesus, or any other historical or mythological figure. Another suspect criterion is the criterion of the **crucifixion** which tends to assume that Jesus was crucified as a man on Earth, which further entails that he did indeed exist historically.[475] The way this criterion is typically employed sees such scholars committing the fallacy of begging the question. Another pair of potentially contradictory[476] (yet also complementary) criteria would be the criterion of **Greek context** and the criterion of **Aramaic context**. It should surely be seen as suspicious that the Criteria could easily render all content in the Gospels as authentic.

Like myself, Carrier is bemused by these illogical criteria, wondering why it would be assumed that Greek or Aramaic context would indicate that the tradition originates from Jesus, rather than the Greek or Aramaic-speaking Gospel writer, or an earlier source (including pre-Jesus sources such as those found at Qumran).[477] That Aramaic context might be found in the Gospels should not be particularly convincing or indicative of Jesus' historicity; Jesus was surely not the only Aramaic-speaking person of first-century Palestine.[478] Used together, these criteria could validate every word of the Judeo-Christian Bible. Finally, the criterion of **historical plausibility** (as well as the related criteria of **contextual plausibility** and **natural probability**) seems superfluous (and unused by many!) given that it is the historian's core duty to determine which explanations are more plausible. Actually, these latter criteria are extremely important, and the shame is that they are not used enough, or appropriately.

An additional problem with these criteria becomes evident. The criteria for authenticity could easily be perceived as generally working only in one direction. There seem to be no definitive criteria for inauthenticity (apart from the aforementioned and relatively little-used plausibility criteria), and sayings/deeds that do not meet the criteria cannot necessarily be ruled out; whilst my contention is arguable, there certainly are no criteria that confidently assert that Jesus could not have existed historically. In using the criteria, only one deed or saying of Jesus needs 'authenticating' in order to 'prove' Jesus' historicity, so that the criteria of authenticity, as typically employed upon our unreliable sources, [479] essentially beg the question: they tend to assume Jesus' historicity, meaning that they are typically of no use to the scholar trying to establish Jesus' historicity.

Robert Price predictably criticises the criteria and how they are used by New Testament critics "who nominate as authentically dominical the sayings that are not obviously disqualified by their criteria", noting that "any or all of them still might be spurious." Price then speculates on what conclusions would be reached if scholars applied the criteria to the sources of other religious traditions, such as the *Hadith* of Muhammad.[480] With such use of the criteria, scholars could label as 'authentic' numerous

events in the lives of mythological and fictional characters, which did not actually happen in a historical sense. Complicating the issue further, any scholar with such a rigid 'yay or nay' approach to possible criteria of inauthenticity,[481] could potentially label accurate descriptions of actual historical events 'inauthentic'.

That a story is embarrassing, vivid, or has been repeated many times, does not prove that the events described therein had indeed occurred. These criteria could be applied to any work of fiction or mythology, to find 'authentic' sayings and deeds. Richard Carrier argues that by employing the criterion of embarrassment, scholars could establish the historical existence of figures such as Attis (castrated), Inanna (stripped naked and killed), and Romulus (kin-slaying founder of Rome).[482] The same criterion could be used to show that Jesus would be accurately described as a child murderer, as the potentially embarrassing story of Jesus' killing of a clumsy young boy (the crime was a bump on the shoulder) depicted in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 'must' be authentic.[483] On the criteria of authenticity, and the quest for the historical Jesus, Gager concludes:

> Basically, it will not be possible to write a biography of Jesus. For this we lack all of the essential data. We know virtually nothing of his parents, siblings, early years (childhood, adolescence, early adulthood), friends, education, religious training, profession, or contacts with the broader Greco-Roman world. We know neither the date of his birth, nor the length of his public ministry (the modern consensus of two or three years is an educated guess based largely on the Gospel of John), nor his age at death (Luke 3:23 states that he was "about thirty when he began"). Thus even an optimistic view of the quest can envisage no more than a collection of "authentic" sayings and motifs devoid of context. How, then, can the historian hope to interpret this material and construct even a sketchy image of Jesus in the absence of these fundamental data? This, after all, is the goal of the quest.[484]

This is not merely some historical revisionist being too harsh on his colleagues. Numerous mainstream scholars are coming to the conclusion that the Criteria of Authenticity cannot possibly help us discover the true Jesus of history.[485] I also find it abhorrent that the Criteria are applied so subjectively. It is as if Historical Jesus scholars focus on a passage they like, and wish was authentic, so they dip their hand into their bag of tricks and pull out a criterion that supports them; rather than beginning with a clear and proper method, they effectively indulge themselves in confirmatory biases. Indeed, perhaps the strongest indictment of the

authenticity criteria (and how they are used by Biblical scholars) however, is demonstrated by the result: an "embarrassing" diversity[486] of theories on who Jesus was, what he said, and what he did.

If the consensus view that a historical Jesus certainly existed is based on such tenuous methodology, it would seem reasonable that the consensus view should be reviewed, while not necessarily immediately rejected as false. Let us end this section with a mainstream scholar's admission that such methods – like the earlier and often mentioned appeal to imaginary sources – are *idiosyncratic*; that they are *unique* to historians who specialise in the New Testament texts:

> The idea of formulating certain "criteria" for an evaluation of historical sources is a peculiar phenomenon in historical-critical Jesus research. It was established in the course of the twentieth century as a consequence of the form-critical idea of dividing Jesus accounts of the Gospels into isolated parts of tradition, which would be examined individually with regard to their authenticity. Such a perspective was not known to the Jesus research of the nineteenth century and it does not, to my knowledge, appear in other strands of historical research. In analysing historical material scholars would usually ask for their origin and character, their tendencies in delineating events from the past, evaluate their principal credibility – for example, whether it is a forgery or a reliable source – and use them together with other sources to develop a plausible image of the concerned period of history. It is not by accident, therefore, that the rather curious "criteria approach" has evoked many criticisms.[487]

Okay, there is room for one more. That these Biblical 'historians' are not necessarily what we would generally call historians, and create a law unto themselves, is even admitted by Christian scholars:

> In fact, the historiography of historical Jesus scholars is eclectic and often unconscious or uninformed of a specific historiography.[488]

Maybe it isn't so counter-intuitive to seek out the opinions of non-New Testament historians and historically informed scholars of religion, after all.

Faith and Inconsistency

It is quite disturbing that even the atheistic scholars demonstrate such strong faith when it comes to the sources they gleefully criticise. Biblical scholars tend to concern themselves with discovering nuggets of truth buried underneath layers of myth and corrections. But this entails that the nuggets of truth are there. Herein is a privileging of the texts, the assumption that these texts do provide genuine historical information about a historical Jesus. Of interest to the philosopher is the relationship between the Gospels and the historicity of Jesus: they are inextricably linked. The Gospels are the chief sources of information on Jesus, while Jesus' life story forms the core of the Gospels. This indicates a biconditional logical connective ('if and only if'). Without Jesus, the Gospels have no story to tell. Without the Gospels, there is no (somewhat early and complete) biography of Jesus' life. John Gager also alluded to this issue of circularity:

> A more serious problem is the patent circularity of the method in dealing with the Gospels. Apart from Paul, who says precious little about Jesus, the sources for our knowledge of early Christian communities are identical with the sources for the quest itself. [489]

It follows then that if Jesus did not exist, the Gospels, if taken to be literal historical accounts, are unreliable. Likewise, if the Gospels are unreliable, it would be reasonable to assume that Jesus did not exist; or at least to rule out that his existence is a certainty. Given that the validity of the Gospels is questioned by scholars (a core activity of Biblical scholarship and criticism), it would follow that it should also be reasonable to question Jesus' historical existence. Using the Gospels to argue for Jesus' existence may be circular reasoning. Arguing from external sources would generally result in a much more convincing case.

It is a serious issue then, despite attempts to minimalise its significance, that there exists only one non-Christian attestation to Jesus within one hundred years of his birth: an author (Josephus) who was born after Jesus' supposed death, and whose two small passages on Jesus attract the suspicion of critical scholars and historians. Critical Biblical scholars can omit as much of the Gospels (as unhistorical) as they please, but they still rely on biased emic/insider accounts that are inextricably interrelated to the idea of Jesus' historical existence. From a logical perspective then,

it would be unreasonable not to have at least some doubt about Jesus' historicity.

Hector Avalos is one academic who vociferously takes issue with the supposed lack of critical thinking skills of Biblical scholars who simply accept (at least in part, as supernatural claims may be omitted) what the gospels say about Jesus, and also takes issue with scholars "privileging" the texts.[490] While not necessarily a mythicist, Avalos claims that Biblical scholarship is primarily a religionist enterprise and also criticises the use of the Bible as a reliable source of history.[491] When it comes to Jesus' supposed resurrection appearances for example, Avalos asserts that scholars should be careful how they use terms such as 'facts' and 'evidence'; he correctly says that stories in the gospels are evidence that these particular stories existed (or perhaps that certain people believed these events occurred), not that the event in question actually happened. [492]

Indeed, there is still not complete agreement over what genre the gospels belong to, an issue we shall later explore. Whether the gospels are examples of ancient biography, Jewish/historical fiction, hagiography, midrashic-haggadic literature, or something else, would no doubt have some effect on how they ought to be viewed. Richard Carrier also criticises Biblical scholars' faith in the sources used to establish Jesus' historicity, in his very – and refreshingly – blunt and opinionated assessment:

> Then I discovered that the field of New Testament studies was so monumentally fucked the task wasn't as straightforward as I had hoped. Very basic things that all scholars pretend have been resolved (producing standard answers constantly repeated as "the consensus" when really it's just everyone citing each other like robbing Peter to pay Paul), really haven't been, like when the New Testament books were written… The end result was that I realized this was going to have to be two books: one resolving the problem of method (because the biggest thing I discovered is that every expert who is a specialist in methodology has concluded, one and all, that the methods now used in Jesus studies are also totally fucked), the other applying my reformed method to the question.[493]

Gager also heavily criticises the methods of Biblical scholars, particularly with regards to the "quest" for the historical Jesus, alluding to the negative effects of their personal beliefs:

> Rigorous historical method has been subordinated to religious and theological concerns. With dogged regularity, the desire to reach authentic Jesus material has led questers to sacrifice methodological rigor or to minimize the difficulties posed by the sources… Working hypotheses have tended to become methodological dogmas and hence immune to critical reassessment… I will argue that previous attempts at the quest have proceeded on unexamined assumptions with respect to one or another of these issues and that prospects for a responsible quest must remain pessimistic until new foundations can be formulated and laid down.[494]

New Testament scholar James Charlesworth provides an example of scholars' uncritical faith in the sources, arguing that, "we also should assume a tradition is authentic until evidence appears that undermines its authenticity."[495] This is not how objective historians go about their business, and is clearly influenced by the Bible scholar's religious beliefs. Surely Charlesworth would not be so understanding and charitable, when it comes to the holy texts of other religious traditions. This 'faith in the sources' raises another issue, which nicely segues into my comments on demonstrable inconsistency.

It is interesting to consider what gives the mainstream Biblical scholar confidence in rejecting as accurate large parts of the gospels (such as supernatural events, which are more easily dismissed), while confidently proclaiming other parts as historical fact. This was partly considered in the discussion on the authenticity criteria, but it was concluded that many of these criteria are speculative (such as what would be found to be embarrassing, and to whom), and rely on unproven assumptions. Avalos introduces the notion that once part of a text has been found to be fabricated, the reader cannot be sure that the text is not entirely fictional.[496]

Stephen Law takes this further with his 'contamination principle', asserting that the authenticity criteria are insufficient to establish Jesus' historicity, and arguing that there are numerous supernatural claims about Jesus in the Gospels (many of which are *crucial* to the story, such as the virgin birth or the resurrection) which should also encourage scepticism over the more mundane claims.[497] Though Avalos and Law are arguably not specialist historians,[498] their 'contamination' musings parallel the teachings of the great Hellenistic historian Polybius:

> … as the proverb tells us that a single drop from the largest vessel suffices to tell us the nature of the whole contents, so we should regard the subject now under discussion. When we find one or two false statements in a book and they prove to be deliberate ones, it is evident that not a word written by such an author is any longer certain and reliable. [499]

Amazingly, Jesus apparently said something similar himself, perhaps hinting that the documents claiming to be about him are not to be trusted: [500]

> "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.[501]

Given that we know the Gospels contain fictions, even Jesus himself would see them as 'false prophets'! We need not be so dichotomous (generally a religious trait), but we also should not be like Fleetwood Mac in being so tolerant and accepting of deceptions and inaccuracies.[502] It should now be intuitively, and evidentially, obvious that we should doubt authors that 'lie'. And as atheists, we generally see all the Biblical authors as 'liars'. Even many (i.e. liberal) Christians should agree, given their tendency to accept that not everything in the Bible is accurate, especially since it is allegedly the Devil who is "the father of lies",[503] not the critical and objective historian. Staying with Law, he then criticises mainstream scholars who think mythicists unreasonable, and objects to historicists "bracketing" the supernatural portions of the Gospels in order to argue for the truth of the more mundane portions, and further criticises conservative apologists who then use these "firmly established facts" to argue for the truth of the miraculous claims.[504]

I liken this to an equally fallacious case for the magical Harry Potter. It is obvious that the magical battles, death-eaters and centaurs are unhistorical, but the stuff about Harry living in London with his abusive uncle and cousin is possible, so therefore, it is certainly true.[505] But… The only way we can explain these more mundane details (such as why

they are being discussed at all), is to acknowledge that the previously omitted material, the magical battles, the basilisks, and the existence of the dark Lord Voldemort, must be true too. And how else can we explain the alliance between Jon Snow (Targaryen?), Stannis the Mannis, and the Wildlings, if not for the existence of the magical Others/White Walkers? Law's principles seemingly justify having at least some doubt over sources that are known to contain some element of fraud, interpolation, allegory, or fiction. Replace 'some' with 'much' and we clearly have a major problem. It also seems disingenuous to make a fuss over the plausibility of the remainder, when the crucial claims, which form the basis for the story, have already been dismissed as very implausible.

Considering the importance, as well as the quantity, of supernatural claims found n the Gospels, we could imagine that at least 70% of the material is fictional. Yet, we know that a good portion of the mundane remainder is also fictional, such as the birth narratives, Jesus' trials, and the famed Sermon on the Mount. So perhaps there is approximately 15% of the overall story that *might* be non-fictional. We would certainly be reasonable in expressing doubt over this 'possibly truthful' portion contained within an overwhelmingly fictional, and theological, tale. The 15% that *might* be 'true' could merely be incidental details like the existence of Pilate, John the Baptist, and Jerusalem, and sayings that originated with others, such as the Golden Rule. In other words, the miniscule, truthful remnant may not even stem from, or have anything to do with, a Historical Jesus.

An example of inconsistency in the field can be provided with an illustration regarding the aforementioned competing views of Jesus. Lay fundamentalist Christians and conservative Bible scholars alike may believe in a miracle-working, divine, Biblical, Christ of Faith. Mythicists tend to cluster at the opposite end of the spectrum, proposing a 'mythical' (i.e. entirely fictitious) Jesus. Most secular scholars (such as Bart Ehrman) tend to lie somewhere in the middle, proposing a so-called Historical Jesus, devoid of divinity and miracles. How these more liberal scholars construct their (many and varying) ideas of who the Historical Jesus was shall be examined more closely in the upcoming critique of historical

Jesus sources, but the main sources for Jesus' life story are the canonical Gospels.

In other words, the Christ of Faith and the Historical Jesus are derived from the same sources; liberal scholars do not have access to completely secular biographies of a 'less religious' Jesus. It seems then that the Historical Jesus, or each scholar's version, is a synthetic construct, a stripped-down version of the Christ of Faith; the Biblical Jesus with varying parts omitted (with no sources of his own). Yet the gospels do not mention this hypothesised Historical Jesus. They tell the story of the Gospel Jesus. New Testament scholar John P. Meier inadvertently highlights other flaws of the criteria and alludes to their inconsistent use, arguing that criteria such as multiple attestation and coherence could support Jesus' miracle traditions.[506] Indeed, if these criteria can prove Jesus' existence, why can't they prove the more implausible (to us atheists) parts of the story?

This is in no way support of miraculous claims, appeals to the supernatural, or a theological assertion of the truth of the Christ of Faith. In fact, both Ehrman (who promotes a historical Jesus), and Price (who is more of a mythicist, or Jesus agnostic) give valid reasons for dismissing miracles when examining the gospels. In a debate with Michael Licona on the resurrection of Jesus, Ehrman states that historians must try and determine the most probable explanations, while miracles by definition are the most improbable explanations. They are considered to be miracles because they overturn scientific laws.[507]

Price, like many competent historians, refers to the sound principle of analogy; if the gospels mention events such as miracles that do not fit into what scientists and scholars know of the world today (the laws of physics for example), and it happens to be more analogous to what is known of myth, then these stories must be rejected as literal and true accounts.[508] Influential American rationalist and revolutionary, Thomas Paine, lent his support to this approach, stating that it is far more likely that a person simply lied than that "nature should go out of her course".[509] For example, it is doubtless less likely that the intergalactic emperor Xenu (of Scientology fame) really did kill all those beings that would become the

thetans, which cause us all to have negative emotions, than that L. Ron Hubbard (the founder of Scientology, and a former science fiction writer) simply made it all up. Now if a secular scholar is willing to dismiss (justifiably) the more miraculous parts of the gospels – and even much of the non-miraculous portions – in order to construct their version of the Historical Jesus, consistency with this sort of scepticism could lead to the rejection of more and more of the story until potentially nothing is left as genuine.

If it is certain that a miraculous event mentioned in the gospels could not have happened, it does not necessitate that another event did occur, merely because it was in accordance with the laws of physics. Perhaps when examining the Gospels then, secular scholars have no justification to confidently dismiss as mythical more supernatural characters such as Satan and Gabriel, while assuming more mundane characters such as Nicodemus (found only in the Gospel of John)[510] to be historical. It would be far more probable that Nicodemus existed (compared to Gabriel), but this should not be confused with certainty. Avalos might wonder why these liberal scholars do not allow for the possibility that all pericopes of the gospels could potentially be dismissed as reliable sources. [511] Perhaps it has to do with personal motives, ego and job security.

After all, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!”[512] It is not exactly a secret that careers in New Testament scholarship effectively entail a – genuine or feigned – belief in the Historical Jesus, if not the Christ of Faith. Though academic study of the New Testament is supposed to be a secular endeavour, it is Christians who tend to be in control of donor grants, university endowments, reviews, conferences, and academic publishing. Clearly, one can be punished for being too radical. Perhaps something to avoid, when they have their mortgages and the job market to worry about.

Not only can all this greatly affect a secular and scholarly historicist like Bart Ehrman, but he specifically could also be influenced by his personal and financial relationship with his wife, Sarah Beckwith, who is a scholar as well, and a Christian. Being proven wrong would be disastrous

for the mainstream historicists. Contrast this with Carrier's status as an independent and self-employed scholar. Contrast this also with my status as a teacher on world religions. If I'm wrong about the Historical Jesus, I might have to change a slide or two in my presentations, and I'll find work easier to come by. The horror. I could also publish a mega-selling book about how this 'nasty atheist' admits the error of his ways, and now thinks that Jesus *definitely* existed and was *possibly* divine…

Staying with motives, it is worth mentioning that prominent historicists – like believers – tend to have made their minds up before researching the matter and writing about it, which serves as a stark contrast to Carrier and myself, who wouldn't be bothered if some sort of Jesus existed, and who previously believed in a Historical Jesus. In fact, I prefer there to have been a Historical Jesus, who generally questioned authority and encouraged people to be nicer to each other.[513] That's basically what I do, albeit with more jocularity and witty sarcasm. So I think our motives are beyond reproach. Now Carrier did not know how his Bayesian analysis, a decade in the making, would turn out, and my more benign master's thesis conclusions were initially unexpected. In any case, scholars should not interpret the possible as probable, nor the probable as certain. Likewise, 'improbable' does not mean 'impossible'; but it still means improbable! Ehrman highlights this seeming inconsistency when discrediting the Gospels as a reliable source for evidence of Jesus' alleged resurrection.[514]

Ehrman realises that the best evidence would be numerous, independent, contemporary, coherent, fairly disinterested eyewitness accounts.[515] He then describes the gospels as few, relying upon each other, written decades after the alleged events, problematic, contradictory, biased, and written by anonymous authors who were not eyewitnesses. [516] He says that the gospels are not the kind of sources historians would want in establishing what probably happened in the past. He seems to discredit the gospels when it comes to opposing the resurrection of Jesus, [517] yet somehow (and perhaps inconsistently) when it comes to the existence of Jesus, he concludes that the gospels "make a convincing case".[518]

As earlier explained, Ehrman is even able to turn these few Gospels into numerous independent sources, by making reference to oral tradition, hypothetical sources, and the 'second degree' hypothetical (and supposedly multiple) sources behind these hypothetical sources,[519] which is hardly an acceptable historical method of dealing with the issue of a lack of primary sources. Now John Dominic Crossan of the *Jesus Seminar* (a Jesus historicist) honestly notes the lack of agreement among Biblical scholars, and also criticises their methods:

> But that stunning diversity is an academic embarrassment. It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.[520]

A clear example of this is when conservative Biblical scholar John Dickson refers to 'facts' such as the "empty tomb" and "numerous eyewitnesses" to make the unjustified and absolutely outrageous claim that historians agree, "that there is a resurrection-shaped dent in the historical record."[521] As for the diversity, it is unacceptable that scholars lack agreement and come up with wildly different conclusions given that they have access to the same sources; perhaps an indication of the inadequacy and inconsistency of their methods. This is an issue that my and Carrier's work with Bayesian approaches seeks to address.

Those that sit on both ends of the 'Jesus spectrum' may well wonder how the liberal scholars can be so certain about some parts of the gospels, while totally dismissing others. Conservative Christians and Jesus agnostics/mythicists alike might wonder how a secular historicist can be so certain that mythicists alone are 'fringe', while so casually (and certainly) dismissing large parts of the sources that mythicists might dismiss in whole – and overlooking the fact that they themselves are 'fringe' in a field dominated by Christians. If the unreliability of the Gospels (or at least the justifiable doubts about them) allows secular scholars to reasonably question Jesus' resurrection, then there is also some justification to question the more natural elements such as Jesus' death.

Before moving on, a quick note on the potential motives of various stakeholders. When it comes to the existence of Jesus, both atheistic sceptics and Christian believers may have valid reasons for accepting a

historical Jesus, *or* denying one. It would seem obvious that a Christian believer would want to see that the figure they revere or dedicate their life to, is verified by history. On the other hand, the believer may place greater importance on faith than on evidence. The believer may also prefer there be no evidence for a Historical Jesus, as it could contradict the Jesus portrayed in the Bible and/or their particular theologies.

Likewise, the atheist may be quite content for there to be no historical Jesus, but could also have good reason for desiring evidence of a Historical Jesus that greatly contradicts the Biblical Jesus, as hinted at above. A secular biography, devoid of supernatural claims, that portrays Jesus as a violent, vulgar, prostitute-visiting alcoholic, who occasionally repeated some teachings he learnt in the Far East, would probably be championed by vocal anti-Christians. In that case, a purely mythical Jesus would actually greatly benefit Christendom, as there would be no risk of the discovery of 'the real Jesus' that could potentially destroy or discredit the faith. Reinforcing this, is the fact that the stories about Jesus' life on Earth appear around one generation after Jesus' alleged death – as if the authors specifically wished to avoid 'eyewitnesses' refuting such outlandish claims. I.e. "That didn't happen, I was there!" It may be cynical to think so, but a non-existing Jesus would certainly serve the Church well.

It is also important to note that it is not only the conservative Christian that may find belief in Jesus comforting. Many secular humanists, Hindus, Muslims and atheists could also happily accept a natural Jesus, or at least one whose nature is seen to be greatly exaggerated in the Gospels. Indeed, such people may wonder why they should deny the existence of a compassionate man who tried to promote some worthwhile ideas, just because others would later ascribe all manner of myths to his life story. I, for one, would think, 'the more such people, the merrier'. There are many questionable passages in the Bible, but generally the hypothesised Historical Jesus seems like a really likeable person. Hence his popularity! Robert Price offers his view on why many atheists might accept a historical Jesus, and why they might viciously criticise their more sceptical brethren:

> Automatically finding the Christ Myth theory kooky or outrageous is, I think, a trace of satisfaction with the lingering conventionalism against which we fight so hard as

> Atheists when the question under debate is not Jesus but God.[522]

Indeed, why fight an unnecessary battle? It seems a little ironic, in this debate among atheists, that while we more sceptical folk see how this issue is divorced from religion, certain secular historicists criticise us or our ideas so as to have an easier time in arguing *contra* religion. This again reinforces my claim that investigating this question is not about attacking Christianity. Plenty of atheists would prefer that we shut up so that they can more easily work against Christianity's central claims!

A Bayesian Alternative

I am certainly not alone in recognising that there would ideally be a more objective way of resolving such questions:

> On specific issues in historical-Jesus studies, the evidence is often quite ambiguous and the use of methods and application of criteria are irreducibly subjective, so that, even within a group of fairly like-minded scholars, consensus is often elusive.[523]

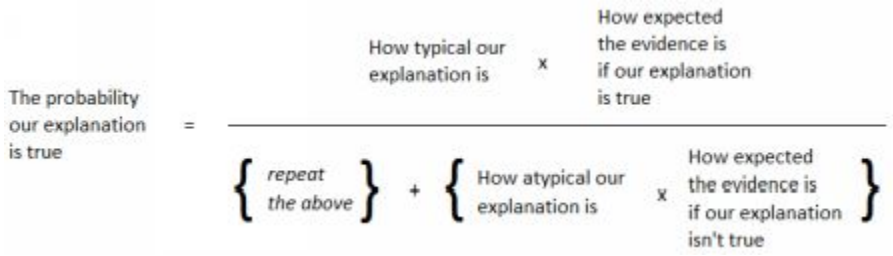
While the humanities can be perceived as being unscientific, the claims about Jesus made by Biblical scholars are historical claims; and historical claims are undoubtedly probabilistic. Those who disagree would either have to simply wave their hands and say we can't know anything, so 'anything goes', which helps nobody and prematurely ends all such discussions, or declare that they know things with absolute 100% certainty, which is impossible and the height of arrogance.[524] Of course, an event happened or it didn't, as critics are wont to point out, so 100% and 0% might seem like reasonable figures to throw about, until we realise that *knowing* that the event did or did not happen is another thing altogether. After all, the past is in the past. We are removed from historical events and cannot observe them. The uncertain world of probabilistic reasoning it is then.

While mathematics may initially seem out of place in the humanities, it is undeniable that the historian relies on probability judgements, in trying to ascertain what actually happened in the past. Bayes' Theorem then, a mathematical theorem that aids in calculating probabilities derived

from a number of sources (and their associated probabilities), is a useful tool in analysing the sources used to establish Jesus' historicity. *The purpose of Bayesian inference is to determine how our beliefs should be shaped and changed, based on evidence.* Indeed, Bayesian methods have been already been used by historians and philosophers, even those investigating religious questions.

Already useful in Science,[525] Bayesian methods are becoming increasingly important in Philosophy of Religion, as evidenced by Richard Swinburne, Robin Collins, William Lane Craig and Herman Philipse.[526] Aviezer Tucker has argued that History would benefit from a Bayesian approach.[527] I have argued for the broad adoption of Bayesian reasoning, as well as for its use in Biblical and Religious Studies, adding to the growing voices in opposition to the increasingly-maligned Criteria of Authenticity, which are oft-used in Historical Jesus research.[528] Historian Richard Carrier has recently argued for the general use of Bayes' Theorem, and also notes that the methods already used by historians are essentially Bayesian.[529] In this, he was supported by Religious Studies scholar Hector Avalos, who argued that this approach could revolutionise historical Jesus studies and could even cast doubt on Jesus' existence. [530]

Indeed, Carrier wrote a whole book on the Bayesian methods he uses to determine the probability of Jesus' existence, and begins with the "embarrassing" problem[531] that historical Jesus scholars have access to the same sources, yet produce wildly differing conclusions; which implies flawed methodology.[532] He also confirms that nothing can be known of history with certainty, especially with regards to Jesus who provides scant and problematic evidence, and that historians must be comfortable with ambiguity.[533] An "agnostic" position is asserted to be a very common result in historical studies.[534] Also noting that "possibly, therefore probably" is fallacious, Carrier asserts that mainstream historical Jesus scholars have not done their job properly.[535] Carrier argues that the solution is Bayes' Theorem, and that all valid historical methodologies already conform to it, presenting Bayes' Theorem in a natural language format:[536]


The probability our explanation is true
=
How typical our explanation is
x
How expected the evidence is if our explanation is true
{ repeat the above }
+
{ How atypical our explanation is
x
How expected the evidence is if our explanation isn't true }

This calculation relies on the probabilities of the truth of the theory considering background knowledge (i.e. how inherently plausible such theories are), and considering the evidence in question. The prior probabilities are very important in Bayesian reasoning.[537] To illustrate: if a woman who is known for telling the truth 99% of the time tells you that she was contacted by Lord Voldemort or Zeus yesterday, should you believe her? And what if she tells the truth *100%* of the time? If the Gospel authors tell the truth 10% of the time and make claims about voices from heaven, should you believe them?

Before we answer that, we would do well to consider all of our background knowledge and associated low prior probabilities, which would lead us to thinking that Lord Voldemort, Zeus, and 'voices from heaven' do not even exist; and if they did, they might not really wish to contact your relatively insignificant friend. Surely they have more important things on their plate, like nabbing that elusive 'boy who lived' (Voldemort), or raping something pretty (Zeus). Rather than believing your friend, you might instead be concerned for their well-being. There are clearly many factors to consider, expressed via both prior probabilities and consequent probabilities, which affect the overall (posterior) probability.

Crucially, this Bayesian equation also takes into account alternative theories that fit/explain the evidence, while Biblical historians may have been guilty of only addressing contradictory evidence relevant to their particularly theory.[538] None of this is foreign to historians, though Biblical scholars may be guilty of ignoring the latter; hence the many differing theories on who Jesus was, and if he even existed historically. Using Bayes' Theorem then encourages historians to consider other theories that fit the evidence just as well (or better), and can force them to be transparent with their claims by assigning quantitative values.

For example, a certain scholar might be a major proponent for theory *x*, which has a 72% chance of explaining some of the evidence.[539] When employing Bayes' Theorem however, the same scholar realises that the unpopular theory *y* has an 87% chance of explaining the evidence; there can be no hiding from this inescapable conclusion. When employing Bayes' Theorem, the historian will no longer be allowed to pass off a merely possible theory as one that is probable, or almost certain; while people can, the consequences of their numbers cannot lie. Those who are sceptical of applying a mathematical approach to the humanities are easily answered by Carrier who asserts that history relies on probabilities, which are mathematical, even when numbers are not explicitly used.[540]

"Even odds" means 50%, for example, "improbable" might mean 20%, "very probable" could mean 95%, while "more than likely" would mean greater than 50%. Of course, you may not agree that these phrases relate to the numbers assigned, but you would not be absolved of the responsibility to explain what numbers are more appropriate when you use such terms. Bayes' Theorem just makes the whole process more transparent; what was once said intuitively can now be asserted mathematically. Mathematics in general is not even necessarily out of place in historical or Biblical studies, as demonstrated by historian Adam M. Schor's use of quantitative modelling in studies of early Christian growth.[541] Carrier then further explains with detailed examples how all valid historical methodologies (such as the argument from evidence and the argument to the best explanation) already conform to and/or are superseded by Bayes' Theorem, and those that do not are simply not logically valid.[542]

It would after all be very difficult to convince a competent historian that considering background knowledge and alternative theories is not good historical methodology. Nevertheless, certain biblical scholars may indeed raise some objections, which are easily dealt with. One objection would be that mathematical and probabilistic reasoning is inappropriate for historical research. This, of course, is simply wrong, given that it is the historian's core duty to try and determine what *probably* happened in the past. Efforts to make this process more transparent and defendable should be applauded, not censured.

Another objection could be the difficulty in assigning quantitative values. Firstly, there are challenges to all quests for truth. If such scholars wish to be ambiguous about their conclusions, then we more rational folk reserve the right to reject their conclusions. Secondly, this is an issue that my brand of 'Bayesian reasoning' (where accurate probabilities are unnecessary) addresses. It is important for Biblical scholars to understand that history is probabilistic, so can make use of mathematics, and that factoring in all background information and the probabilities of alternative theories (which Bayes' Theorem enforces) is good historical methodology. A related, and rational, objection would concern the GIGO principle.

Like all formulas, Bayes' Theorem is at the mercy of the all-important 'garbage in, garbage out' principle. Just as a valid deductive argument is only as good as its weakest premise, so the formulaic solution can only be as reliable as the data – sometimes relying on key assumptions – used in calculating it. There are instances, related to religious studies, where Bayes' Theorem has been misused by scholars, which could contribute to hesitation in deeming Bayesian reasoning appropriate. One example is a particular case for Jesus' resurrection, whereby Timothy and Lydia McGrew admitted that their work relied on the unproven assumption that God exists. Such an assumption obviously has massive implications on prior probability, so arguably, the McGrews are not utilising Bayes' Theorem at all. They also overestimated the reliability of the Gospels, assuming, erroneously, that in all 'natural matters', the Gospels are accurate. They also ignored the relatively high probability of outright fabrication.[543] With these assumptions, calculations are effectively redundant!

Robin Collins utilises Bayes' Theorem to justify the teleological or 'fine-tuning of the Universe' argument. There are numerous issues with such arguments, though one specifically relevant to Bayesian reasoning would quite clearly be the identity of the Creator involved. Assuming design, the inherent improbability – or prior probability – that it is Collins' God that is the designer (out of thousands of imagined gods and infinitely many gods not yet imagined) is not addressed by Collins, despite his claim to be utilising Bayes' Theorem. Strong empirical evidence would be required, though Collins offers none, meaning that this crippling

prior (im)probability is not at all overcome. Perhaps realising these problems, Collins admits to diminishing the significance of prior probabilities, though they are so crucial to Bayesian methodology.

Noted philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne also uses Bayes' Theorem and attempts to incorporate some background knowledge, though misuses the formula by incorporating unjustified probabilities. Swinburne provides a perfect example of how a useful formula can be used correctly (in regards to the actual calculation), yet is subject to data that has been incorrectly obtained. None of this should deter the historian or Scholar of Religion from making use of Bayes' Theorem or Bayesian reasoning. It is, rather, an indictment of those scholars who seek to misuse Bayes' Theorem in an unscholarly pursuit to justify their personal beliefs. Some might also object to our 'ignoring' frequentism, or in adopting frequentist approaches, which is just strange as the user of Bayes' Theorem can adopt elements of both Bayesianism and frequentism, as several scholars have now recognised.[544] Indeed, appealing to historical frequencies seems a very rational – and necessary – thing to do in formulating our prior probabilities.

Scholars can debate endlessly over whether Bayes' Theorem or mathematics in general has any place in the humanities and social sciences. Noting that Bayesian thinking conforms to good historiography (considering the current theory, alternative theories, current evidence, and background knowledge) and remembering that historical claims are probabilistic, opposing the usefulness of Bayesian thinking would seem to be an exercise in futility. We mustn't let the fact that some incompetent scholars misuse the theorem deter us. Rest assured, there are competent scholars opposing and exposing them, using the very same theorem!

Echoing the first objection, another may be that history is in the past, and has happened, so that Bayesian theorising over whether a certain event is probable or not is pointless. Apart from ignoring the very reason for the historian's existence, this is technically correct in the sense that Bayesian reasoning cannot tell us what actually happened, what is impossible, etc. Just like sound historical reasoning. All it does is indicate what theory is most rationally believed, at that time. Just like sound historical reasoning.

There is a reason for that. Sound historical reasoning is Bayesian. Indeed, sound reasoning in general seems to be Bayesian. Bayesian reasoning simply symbolises and formalises what already takes place in the heads of logical people. In fact, we can take comfort by the fact that this probabilistic approach allows us to make judgements even when evidence is scarce, as it is with the issue of Jesus' historicity. Bayesian reasoning informs us as to what is more reasonably believed, based on the currently available evidence. As we gather more evidence, our conclusions may change.

Even those that disagree with a scientific-mathematical representation of history can at least agree that history then becomes ambiguous and shall not give us certainty[545] – so that the inappropriateness of historicists claiming certainty is illuminated, and agnosticism over Jesus' history is already justified. But if we want to find out what is probable, whether it is 'good history' or not, we *must* proceed mathematically. Without this, we are only discussing possibilities, and ought to be as humble and accepting about our ignorance as Confucius.[546] Anyone who rejects a Bayesian or probabilistic approach to history or epistemology is welcome to explain how she or he knows that his or her theory is the most probable one.[547]

While we may never know the truth with absolute certainty,[548] Bayes' Theorem allows the scholar to objectively compare how revealed evidence and background knowledge fits various theories, and thus should prove to be very helpful in historical Jesus studies; more so than the popular Criteria. But I don't just expect you to take my word for it. I will prove it to you. Bayesian-style, of course.

The Criteria vs. Bayes

> On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:21-23).[549]

The Book of Acts, oft-seen as an extension of Luke's Gospel, claims that Herod Agrippa was struck down by 'an angel of the Lord'.[550] Given

that angels are mythical creatures, this story is inherently unlikely to be historical. Nevertheless, the Criteria of Authenticity could support this passage's authenticity. On the one hand, this is a potentially embarrassing claim, as God is portrayed in a violent manner, so the argument could be that Luke (the alleged author of Acts) would not make up an account that portrays his God negatively; the passage must therefore be accurate. The passage is also written in Greek, so the criterion of Greek context can be invoked. Furthermore, other accounts of Herod's death exist, implying multiple independent

attestation, though they tend to lack the involvement of the angel. The criterion of vividness could also be referred to, with the passage containing 'unnecessary' details such as Herod Agrippa's attire on the day.

More sceptical historians would immediately reject the Acts account of Herod's death, due to the involvement of a miraculous or supernatural explanation. Recall, however, the attitude of Meier, who effectively implied that the Criteria could support miraculous traditions, as I just crudely outlined. By employing some of the better-known Criteria of Authenticity, we can argue that this account is veridical, but as atheistic scholars, we know that this account is nonsense. That this story is embellished is a conclusion that is simply arrived at by employing the principle of analogy, or in considering that history favours the most likely explanations, while miracles are by definition, unlikely. Thankfully, the unlikelihood of this version of the story being authentic can be demonstrated formally, through Bayesian methodology. No 'closed-hearted atheistic assumptions' necessary.

Bayes' Theorem also sidesteps any sort of 'prove the negative' argument, hindering proponents of a theory from touting their 'possible' views as 'probable'. Since Herod was killed by an angel (*h*, our hypothesis) or died by way of other (natural) causes, we basically have two mutually exclusive hypotheses, making for a relatively simple set of calculations. But there is one aspect of this formula that renders accurate calculations unnecessary. In fact, I would argue that employing Bayesian reasoning without calculations is potentially more useful and reliable, given that a multitude of errors can be made when assigning quantitative values. The inherent probability of the theory (without yet considering the

available evidence, such as the reference in Acts) is extremely small. Conversely, the inherent plausibility of the alternative is very large, so that the probability of *h* being true will likely also be very small.[551]

Explaining further, the inherent plausibility of *h* is so small as no account of angels killing nobles has ever been confirmed. Such acts are also are not analogous to our understandings of biology and physics, while they are analogous to fiction and mythology. The alternative theory that Herod died of natural causes, includes the explanation, 'the claim was simply fabricated'. This is an explanation that is very likely, especially when dealing with claims that violate the laws of physics. This means that the revealed evidence, *e*, did not even need to be seriously considered in order to rationally dismiss the claim, *h*. The evidence must be so extraordinary and thorough, and not so for the alternative, that it overcomes the prior probabilities, which so favour the alterative theory.

In the specific case of Herod's death by supernatural causes, the evidence is quite poor, stemming from an anonymous text, that along with the rest of the Gospels, are filled with errors, myth, and interpolations (more on this when we analyse the Biblical sources). Given that such evidence also works well for the alternative theory of fabrication, there is no extraordinary evidence that overcomes the inherently low prior probability. So we can rationally and formally judge *h* to be extremely improbable; so close to 0% that we needn't seriously entertain the notion, despite the lack of 'absolute proof' that Acts is inaccurate here. As this case study demonstrates, Bayesian reasoning can be formally and mathematically valid, even if accurate calculations are not actually done.

Given that the claim, *h*, is inherently implausible, the evidence is poor, and alternative explanations such as fabrication are highly plausible and also fit well with the examined evidence, the matter can be considered settled. It is reasonable to believe that Herod died by natural causes; he was not killed by an angel of the Lord. The antithesis is strengthened, however, by existing evidence that Herod's death was indeed natural, namely the Josephean account.[552] In this version of the story, there is no angel of the Lord. Instead, Herod spots an owl and thinks that this bodes him ill fortune. Herod then dies after 5 days.

This account is much more plausible than the Lukan account, and Josephus is a much more reliable source (though not perfect) than anonymous Biblical writings that are filled with mythology and have clear evangelical intent. It is also easy to see how the owl – an animal that is known to exist and can be interpreted as being an ominous omen by the superstitious – could have been replaced by a murderous angel (a mythical creature) in the Lukan account. In other words, Luke probably referred to Josephus (as scholars virtually know she/he did), and changed the story to suit his/her purposes – a popular practice of the New Testament authors.

Bayesian reasoning is in this case proven superior. While biblical apologists' misuse of the Criteria can support the supernatural account, Bayesian thinking leads historians and other scholars towards far more plausible theories. Note also that the evidence from Josephus, which clearly supports the alternative hypothesis, wasn't even needed to demonstrate that *h* is a virtual impossibility. This goes to show how powerful is this Bayesian reasoning. We don't necessarily need direct evidence or a 'smoking gun', such as a passage from Mark 'admitting' that he is embellishing the real story of the Historical Jesus, or a letter of Paul wherein he more explicitly outlines his Celestial Jesus view, or even a note from Peter about how he invented everything about Jesus, be it the Historical, Celestial, or Gospel version. We can often – but not always – make reasonable judgements based on the inherent (or prior) plausibility, alone.

Now a proponent of the Criteria could say that they arrived at the same result by appealing to the criteria of historical plausibility and so forth. That would be a poor retort. It would be all too easy for me, and probably unfair, to simply say that such criteria are lesser-known than the criteria of much/not so much vividness, Greek/Aramaic context, embarrassment, and multiple attestation (think innumerable hypothetical sources), which could all be used to support the Lukan version's veridicality. Apart from debates over what is historically plausible (Christians and atheists will obviously be at odds here), it is unclear how the various criteria are to be weighed against each other. When, for example, does multiple attestation or vividness trump what is historically implausible? And, how does the non-

believer justify what is historically plausible? If only there was an approach that could resolve these unpleasantries!

We clearly see that Bayesian reasoning can also arrive at the more probable conclusions, whilst handily incorporating absolutely all the relevant information, and more transparently, without ever having to commit to a strongly naturalistic worldview, and without ever having to assert that certain things are simply not possible. By contrast, the typical use of the Criteria by mainstream biblical scholars is obviously burdened by the possible contradictions between the various criteria. While the objections to Bayesian reasoning have thus far been shown to be logically invalid, the Criteria – and more importantly, the ways in which they are misused – are becoming increasingly scorned, and would need to be adequately defended to make a resulting case convincing.

There’s not much more that needs to be said about the methods of mainstream Historical Jesus researchers at this point; they’re terrible. It’s time to look at the evidence.

The Sources: We All Know They're Rubbish

One of the most substantial contentions by mythicists is that the available sources are unreliable and should not be trusted as sources of accurate historical information. Jesus historicists and mainstream New Testament scholars such as Helmut Koester also describe the surviving evidence as problematic.[553] There are sceptical arguments about every source used for establishing Jesus' historicity, many of which shall now be addressed. It is important to mention a few of the limitations that all of these sources share. With no primary sources to compare them with, historians may not be able to fully determine the reliability of these secondary sources. In addition, there is no access to the originals of these documents, and thus it cannot be ruled out that important changes were made, nor can composition dates be stated with absolute certainty.[554]

For us to use these highly problematic and (mostly) religious sources seems absurd. Are we not atheists? Should we not look upon such sources with some measure of suspicion and scorn, even if we can appreciate their poetic and didactic qualities? Nevertheless, there are external sources that mention Jesus as well, and we shall examine all the major extant sources, to determine if the Historical Jesus' existence can be declared with certainty.

The Silence of the Primary Sources

The easiest job in the world is to critique the contemporary/eyewitness accounts we have of Jesus. There aren't any. This tends to lead to one of the most common arguments from mythicists: the argument from silence. The idea is that since there are no extra-Biblical references to Jesus that are contemporary and by eyewitnesses, we can be doubtful over his existence. This argument can be extended to a more definite "there are no primary sources supporting the existence of Jesus", when considering that the earliest Christian references (such as in the Pauline Epistles) are written decades after his supposed lifetime (assuming Jesus died around

30CE), by non-eyewitnesses. This argument is generally accepted by historicists.[555] Bart Ehrman for example, acknowledges the relative historical silence on Jesus:

> What sorts of things do pagan authors from the time of Jesus have to say about him? Nothing. As odd as it may seem, there is no mention of Jesus at all by any of his pagan contemporaries. There are no birth records, no trial transcripts, no death certificates; there are no expressions of interest, no heated slanders, no passing references – nothing. In fact, if we broaden our field of concern to the years after his death – even if we include the entire first century of the Common Era – there is not so much as a solitary reference to Jesus in any non-Christian, non-Jewish source of any kind. I should stress that we do have a large number of documents from the time – the writings of poets, philosophers, historians, scientists, and government officials, for example, not to mention the large collection of surviving inscriptions on stone and private letters and legal documents on papyrus. In none of this vast array of surviving writings is Jesus' name ever so much as mentioned.[556]

However, Ehrman would later claim the following:

> With respect to Jesus, we have numerous, independent accounts of his life in the sources lying behind the Gospels (and the writings of Paul) – sources that originated in Jesus' native tongue Aramaic and that can be dated to within just a year or two of his life (before the religion moved to convert pagans in droves). Historical sources like that are is (*sic*) pretty astounding for an ancient figure of any kind.[557]

This claim refers to the hypothetical sources he assumes existed, as earlier explained, and is thus entirely unconvincing.[558] Modern scholars and historians certainly do not have access to these hypothetical sources behind the Gospels (or the writings of Paul); nor have these non-existing sources been accurately dated. It is doubtful that any historian would find Ehrman's numerous non-existent sources "astounding". Other historians can speculate as to why respected Jesus historicists such as Ehrman would feel the need to fabricate evidence, if Jesus' historicity could not reasonably be questioned, based on the evidence. Obviously, historicists wouldn't invent the evidence they required, if they actually had it. Finally, if we – against all common sense and scholarly rigour – would grant the existence of an Ehrmanian early source, like *M*, we must also grant the existence of my exceedingly accurate and authentic *Ephemeris de Paulus* source, which contradicts the former, essentially proving Jesus' non-existence, whilst also being older.

The discussion of the historical Jesus is generally limited to historical documents, written by persons other than Jesus, as that is all that is available. Certainty cannot be provided by hypothetical documents, and there are no available artefacts (such as his tombstone, a sculpture of him, or a piece of furniture he made), or works written by Jesus himself.[559] The sources for Jesus are all, at best, secondary sources, and are all textual. The earliest extra-Biblical references (such as passages among the works of Josephus and Tacitus) appear decades after the supposed events. The New Testament books all appear several decades to a century after the alleged events of Jesus' life.[560] These sources are not contemporary, nor can they be assumed to be penned by eyewitnesses.

That any of the sources could have been written by eyewitnesses is actually very unlikely. Given that Josephus and Tacitus were both born after Jesus' supposed death, Paul never claims to be an eyewitness (he even asserts that his sources are purely supernatural),[561] the canonical Gospels are by anonymous authors, and that the gospel writers do not claim to be eyewitnesses, there is no reason to assume that modern scholars have access to eyewitness accounts. Avalos also points out that the Greco-Roman sources used as 'independent confirmation' of Jesus' historicity all depend on manuscripts dating from the mediaeval era, allowing plenty of opportunity for creative editing.[562]

We should also consider that most Christian documents of the first few centuries were entirely forged, which could very well include the Gospels. There is a total lack of primary sources when it comes to establishing Jesus' historicity. This is generally not opposed by historicists. What is up for debate is how significant this is. Arguments such as "there is more evidence for Jesus than for any other figure in history" will be rejected as fallacious (Julius Caesar, for example, is attested by numerous primary sources), and irrelevant.[563] The only concern is with the available sources for Jesus, and how reliable they are.

Any 'argument' that primary sources are not important with regards to Jesus studies must also be rejected as fallacious, and treated as suspicious. It is likely a defence that would only reasonably be put forward by a religious apologist, who has identified the issue of a complete lack of

primary sources. According to historians, primary sources are of the utmost importance. Common sense would also hopefully dictate that contemporary documents, written by reasonably disinterested eyewitnesses would generally be more trustworthy than biased, non-eyewitness accounts written decades after the fact. When it comes to historical Jesus studies, the various questions intended to be asked of the primary sources[564] can unfortunately only be applied to the available secondary sources.

And the questions intended to be asked of secondary sources[565] cannot reasonably be asked at all; given that they demand comparison to the primary sources, which are no longer extant (and possibly never existed). Given these difficulties, it stands to reason that the lack of primary sources (as direct evidence, and as a reference for the secondary sources) ensures that whatever is said about Jesus, is not said with certainty. From a critical perspective, this alone would seemingly justify having at least some doubts as to the historical existence of Jesus. One thing that could diminish the significance of this argument is the theorised existence of a reliable oral tradition that originates during and soon after the lifetime of Jesus, emerging in the Gospels.[566]

But such oral traditions are hypothetical, and cannot be critically examined. It also seems unlikely, as it becomes difficult to explain why the Gospels differ, if they all make use of such a reliable and authentic oral tradition, and since anthropological studies reveal that oral tradition is typically unreliable, with people happily changing the details to suit their needs.[567] Gager is one mainstream scholar who dismisses the unjustified belief in the reliability of oral tradition:

> Thus, the fact that we are limited to written texts means that we can never reconstruct changes which occurred during oral transmission… we must conclude that all previous attempts at the quest have proceeded on ill-founded and misleading assumptions about the oral tradition.[568]

While Biblical scholars do not have access to eyewitness accounts, Gager notes that even if they did, the unreliability of oral transmission makes doubt a prerequisite. He also argues that scholars have “not proven that early Christianity offered the institutional or social conditions that

would have promoted careful memorization and controlled transmission of oral material. And without strong evidence to the contrary, any theory of a fixed oral tradition will remain highly dubious."[569] Ehrman has also criticised scholarly reliance on oral tradition, though he himself relies on it, noting that, "Stories are moulded to the time and circumstance in which they are told."[570] Appealing to the apparently impressive oral traditions of the rabbinical Jews is fallacious, and also anachronistic. The great scholar of Judaism that is Jacob Neusner agrees, and is particularly scathing about those appealing to apparently reliable oral traditions:

> They posit "oral tradition" without identifying institutional evidence (e.g., schools for professional memorizers, a class of memorizers, a status assigned to what was memorized) pertinent to the first century; there is ample evidence for the third and fourth centuries that should serve as a model. The work of picking and choosing what to believe is "very early" and "even back to the time of Jesus" out of the mass of allegations that the whole goes back anyhow to Moses (so why not also to Jesus?) rarely is systematic. Usually it is anecdotal, episodic, and therefore capricious. If subjective opinion makes its way as fact, it is because of the political power of a given professor, not because of the power of persuasion of reasoned and systematic arguments, beginning with hypotheses on the character of the evidence in hand – the documents and how their authors know what they tell us… When a New Testament scholar provides evidence that the Judaism of the dual Torah, represented by the Mishnah, Tosefta, two Talmuds, and midrash-compilations belonging in particular to rabbinic authorities, flourished in the early decades of the first century in Galilee, then and only then will the promiscuous citation of those writings in the interpretation of the life and teachings of Judaism prove intellectually legitimate. Otherwise silly arguments about "would our holy rabbis lie?" and "you have to believe it until you can prove it didn't happen" will be seen for what they are.[571]

> The thesis of New Testament form-history may be sound, but it cannot find any support whatsoever in the earliest document of Judaism. Since form-historians have commonly invoked Jewish procedures of oral formulation and oral transmission, I have to give them the sad news that these procedures, so far as they are indicated in the Mishnah, do not go back much before 200 C.E.[572]

> But if people assumed that every version represented a singular and authentic oral tradition, as valid a witness to the "original" formulation as any other, then they would be unable to cope with, or even take seriously, the differences between one example of a story and the next.[573]

> Now, if I may make up a source that we do not have (as we shall see later on New Testament scholars are happy to accomplish when they come to rabbinic literature!)… Since we do not yet have that story, we return to reality. We have as fact only what the sources tell us… What can anyone say, beyond, "What we cannot show, we do not know" – except to add, "and may not invent."[574]

> It is commonplace to allege that there was a continuous process of oral tradition. But no one has proved it in detail, not for all of the documents, not for all of the materials in them. It is a self-serving rationalization for the fundamentalism at hand, not a serious scholarly argument academically demonstrated through tests of falsification and validation. The argument from oral tradition, asserted but unproved, testifies to self-indulgence among people who in their own area know better. It is one thing to show that a given document indicates that it is formulated to be memorized, as I have proved for the Mishnah. It is another to allege on the basis of stories or sayings that all documents, or all traditions now contained in documents, were memorized. That allegation rests on the generalization of a few stories treated as absolute fact: about how God taught the Torah to Moses (!), and the like – fundamentalism at a new low. To this nonsense it suffices to respond: what we cannot show, we do not know; what we have not shown, we cannot adduce as fact.[575]

Another potentially valid defence against the argument of silence may be that modern historians cannot reasonably expect primary sources. Mythicists tend to reject this claim, asserting that if Jesus was a historically significant figure, someone would have written about him, in a time when there were ample historians and authors (such as Philo of Alexandria),[576] and especially considering the claims of Jesus' fame, miracles and other great achievements.[577] This may be a valid rebuttal however if the original argument were phrased thusly, "the lack of primary source evidence *proves* that the historical Jesus did not exist".

Such an argument would be a fallacious appeal to ignorance (although such a claim levelled at the Christ of Faith would be deductively valid, as such a figure unambiguously demands numerous contemporary accounts). However, there is no issue with the Jesus mythicist forming an argument from silence that simply raises doubt on, rather than 'disproving', the historical Jesus. In any case, whether historians should expect direct evidence is not the most relevant point. The fact is, no evidence, is no evidence. There can be innumerable explanations as to why there are no primary sources for a historical Jesus; some of them may be valid. That does not solve the problem, nor does that magically improve the sources we actually have.

There is still a total lack of primary sources, and scholars must accept that that places limitations on what can be known about Jesus with certainty. Hector Avalos agrees, and goes so far as to describe any further progress in the quest for the historical Jesus as "futile because we simply do not have *any* preserved accounts of Jesus from his own time or from

any proven eyewitnesses."[578] The lack of contemporary/eyewitness accounts about Jesus is even more astonishing (i.e. improbable) given the roughly one thousand years of Christians yielding great power in preserving Christian texts and 'not preserving' or even suppressing other texts. In other words, with the power Christians had, we would expect such good evidence for Jesus to have been preserved.[579] When we further consider that 'no Jesus' would also yield 'no primary source evidence', we surely have some support for ahistoricity, even if just a little.

Aside from this point, mythicists could move the argument from silence into a more assertive direction by pointing to overall silences and suspect gaps in the records of early authors writing about events occurring during Jesus' lifetime. Philo of Alexandria for example, makes no mention of Jesus or his followers; nor does Seneca the Younger, a contemporary of Jesus, who discusses crucifixion at some length, yet neglects to refer to one which would become history's most famous example.[580] Staying with Seneca, let's look at the sorts of topics that he does consider historically significant, for the benefit of many generations of people to come:

> Nay, men of the meanest lot in life have by a mighty impulse escaped to safety, and when they were not allowed to die at their own convenience, or to suit themselves in their choice of the instruments of death, they have snatched up whatever was lying ready to hand, and by sheer strength have turned objects which were by nature harmless into weapons of their own. For example, there was lately in a training-school for wild-beast gladiators a German, who was making ready for the morning exhibition; he withdrew in order to relieve himself, – the only thing which he was allowed to do in secret and without the presence of a guard. While so engaged, he seized the stick of wood, tipped with a sponge, which was devoted to the vilest uses, and stuffed it, just as it was, down his throat; thus he blocked up his windpipe, and choked the breath from his body.[581]

Seneca obviously considers bizarre and sickening ways to die, more significant than our significant-but-insignificant Jesus, the person whose teachings would lead to the creation of one of the world's largest religious traditions. There's actually quite a lot of benign historical information about which public servants did what tasks, how certain people brushed their teeth with urine, the sorts of animals people ate during lean times, and most importantly, how people took a shit, how they disposed of said shit, and who they shat with. And yet, not a single contemporary of Jesus,

including the supposedly many that were touched by his teachings and/or witnessed his apparent miracles, thought it necessary to write anything down.[582] We are meant to believe that they just couldn't be bothered. It was apparently vital to ancient historians, that they document all sorts of rectal issues; a crucified convict proclaimed the Son of God however, not so much.[583]

Now that we have bemoaned what we don't have, let us move on to what we do have.

'Other' Christian Sources

I generally overlook potential Christian sources from outside of the canonical New Testament, such as the so-called Gnostic gospels, and writings of the early Church Fathers, as they are generally seen as inauthentic, incomplete and/or very late.[584] That is not to say that they are completely irrelevant. Indeed, they can be used to demonstrate that early Christians may have believed in a purely Celestial Jesus. In any case, there are supposedly better sources available, according to historicists (whose claims I tend to focus on), such as the canonical Gospels,[585] and the relatively early references by Josephus and Tacitus. (It is still interesting to note how even the atheistic scholars privilege the canonical texts, over the non-canonical texts, and the holy texts of other religious traditions.)[586]

Two potential exceptions would be *Q* (a hypothetical source) and the *Gospel of Thomas*; though they are generally considered to be 'sayings documents' containing little to no narrative about the historical Jesus. [587] Scholar of Religion John Gager does raise an intriguing point regarding the perception of the historicity of the 'canonical' and 'non-canonical' Christian sources however, pointing to the influence of theological beliefs:

> On what grounds can one justify this drastic reduction in the number and type of possible sources, especially with respect to the noncanonical or apocryphal Gospels? The answer would appear to lie in the canonical status of the Synoptics. Their religious authority as sacred scripture has been extended to cover their historical authority as well.

> More often than not this transfer of authority seems to have taken place unconsciously, for one rarely finds arguments to the effect that these particular Gospels attained canonical status because of their greater historical reliability.[588]

(Non-Christian) Extrabiblical Sources

The following extra-Biblical sources share a number of characteristics that could raise some doubt as to their reliability as evidence for Jesus' historicity. All these sources are secondary sources. They are written decades to centuries after the events of Jesus' life, by non-eyewitnesses. Many of these authors were born after Jesus' death. Furthermore, there are no extant primary sources to compare them to and to validate them, so historians cannot be certain about their reliability. Some of these sources may have been susceptible to pious fraud. Historians also do not have access to the originals, so cannot be absolutely certain about which parts are authentic (if any) and which are forged (if any). Even if genuine, these sources may merely re-iterate what is already 'known' from the Gospels, or could simply repeat what a Christian contemporary believed. That Christians would spread stories of Jesus in the late first century, second century, and beyond, would not be particularly surprising.

Ehrman goes as far as to say that these sources are relatively unimportant in the debate on Jesus' historicity, admitting that they contain nothing that cannot be taken from the earlier sources (generally the Gospels),[589] while Casey didn't seem interested in them at all. Even conservative scholars seem to agree on this:

> Still, if we want any details about Jesus' life and teachings, we must turn to the New Testament. Extrabiblical sources confirm what we read in the Gospels, but they do not really tell us anything new. The question must be: how historically reliable are the New Testament documents?[590]

Interestingly, Ehrman was quite happy to discount the reliability of the gospels also, when it came to his discounting of their miraculous claims. [591] Of course, if these extra-Biblical sources can be dismissed, claims of Jesus' historicity rely almost solely on the Bible, an obviously religious collection of books that appeal to the supernatural. This brief overview of

the extra-Biblical sources would potentially be enough to establish that it is reasonable to have some doubts as to what capacity these sources can establish or confirm Jesus' historicity. However, Biblical scholars (including but not limited to mythicists) offer other arguments that raise more questions of these sources' reliability, which shall now be surveyed.

Josephus

Among the works of Josephus, scholars find two disputed passages often used as evidence for Jesus' historicity. First, from Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, is the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum*:

> Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.[592]

This is such a powerful passage that would seemingly confirm Jesus' existence, and also his status as the Messiah, that it sounds almost too good to be true. It is. Many scholars, both mythicists and historicists, have their doubts about this passage. With references to Jesus such as "if it be lawful to call him a man" (alluding to his divinity) and "He was the Christ", it would seem that Josephus not only confirms Jesus' historical existence, but was a Christian believer also. Any doubt is dispelled with his allusion to the resurrection, as well as to the thousands of prophecies Jesus supposedly fulfilled. One obvious problem is that Josephus was a Pharisaic Jew,[593] the same people Jesus called "children of the devil".[594] It would seem highly unlikely that a historian, let alone a Jewish historian, would hint that Jesus was divine, that he fulfilled Biblical prophecy, that he was resurrected, and would call him "Christ".

Many scholars see this passage as fraudulent, in whole,[595] or in part.[596] One reason is that early Christian theologian and apologist, Origen, writing after Josephus, claimed that Josephus did not believe Jesus was the

Christ.[597] Historians might also expect Origen to make use of this Josephus quotation, if it existed during his lifetime. Other early Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr, also fail to quote this passage. Highly respected Josephean scholar, Louis Feldman, discusses the historical silence surrounding the *Testimonium Flavianum*:

> We may remark here on the passage in Josephus which has occasioned by far more comment than any other, the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum* (*Ant.* XVIII.63-4) concerning Jesus. The passage appears in all our manuscripts; but a considerable number of Christian writers – Pseudo-Justin and Theophilus in the second century, Minucius Felix, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Julius Africanus, Tertullian, Hippolytus and Origen in the third century, and Methodius and Pseudo-Eustathius in the early fourth century – who knew Josephus and cited from his works do not refer to this passage, though one would imagine that it would be the first passage that a Christian apologist would cite. In particular, Origen (*Contra Celsum* 1.47 and *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17), who certainly knew Book 18 of the *Antiquities* and cites five passages from it, explicitly states that Josephus did not believe in Jesus as Christ. The first to cite the *Testimonium* is Eusebius (c. 324); and even after him, we may note, there are eleven Christian writers who cite Josephus but not the *Testimonium*. In fact, it is not until Jerome in the early fifth century that we have another reference to it.[598]

If this passage contains Christian interpolations to some extent (agreed upon by both mythicist and historicist scholars), it might not be surprising if the whole passage was fraudulent. The precedent has already been set that the text was tampered with. Even Ehrman admitted that the removal of the entire passage makes the surrounding text – which I think seems rather more downbeat[599] – flow more smoothly,[600] that a student of his (Ken Olson) concludes that the entire passage is fraudulent, and that the first person to quote it is Eusebius (a fourth-century Christian bishop).[601] This could be significant as Eusebius seemed tolerant of pious fraud (justifying lying for the Church)[602] and by his own words, raises questions as to his reliability as a historian: “Hence we shall not mention those who were shaken by the persecution… But we shall introduce into this history in general only those events which may be useful first to ourselves and afterwards to posterity.”[603]

Given that Eusebius is the first to make mention of the Testimonium Flavianum, and that all existing versions of Josephus’ *Antiquities* probably derive from Eusebius’ copy,[604] it is no wonder why some scholars would not only suspect that the passage is entirely fraudulent, but that it

was Eusebius himself, or his predecessor, who fabricated it.[605] Interestingly, a specialist linguist recently analysed the passage and compared it to Josephus' writings and to Christian creeds composed centuries later resulting in some damning conclusions:

> The narrative grammar of the *Testimonium Flavianum* sets it sharply apart from Josephus's other stories of the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate. The most likely explanation is that the entire passage is interpolated, presumably by Christians embarrassed at Josephus's manifest ignorance of the life and death of Jesus. The *Jewish Antiquities* would in this respect be consistent with the other chronicler of this age, Josephus's contemporary and rival historian, Justus of Tiberias, who wrote a history of this period that conflicted with Josephus and claimed Josephus's version to be self-serving. Justus's work has not survived, but we know from other sources that he wrote in great detail about the exact period of Tiberius's reign that coincided with Jesus' ministry – and that he did not mention Jesus. Outside the Gospels, there is no independent contemporary (i.e., first century CE) account of these events. The silence of other commentators, and the absence of any mention of the *Testimonium* by Christian writers for two full centuries after Josephus, even when engaged in fierce polemic about Jesus, are strong indications that the passage was not present in Josephus's own extraordinarily detailed account of this period. The activities of a religious fanatic who moved around Galilee and Judaea preaching a gospel of peace and salvation, was said to have performed miracles, was followed by crowds of thousands of adoring disciples, and within the space of a few hours invaded the hallowed grounds of the Temple, was hauled up before the Sanhedrin, tried by King Herod, interrogated by Pontius Pilate and crucified, all amid public tumult, made no impression on history-writers of the period.[606]

On the likelihood that the passage is either a Christian interpolation or authentic but stemming from Gospel-believing Christians, some have noted the suspiciously numerous similarities between the Testimonium Flavianum and the Emmaus narrative in Luke's gospel.[607] Additionally, this, combined with a growing trend of dating Luke to the early second century, making Josephus' book older, makes the case for a later interpolation look ever more plausible. Of course, even if Luke predates Josephus and the passage is authentic, it is wholly unconvincing, as Josephus would just be plagiarising from Luke's gospel!

A form of the Testimonium Flavianum is also found in a version of Josephus' *Wars of the Jews*, the so-called *Slavonic Josephus*; though this version is largely considered to be a mediaeval invention, filled with Christian interpolations, having "no value either for the study of Josephus or the beginnings of Christianity."[608] It certainly is not an 'extreme' view to imagine that the most important and only first-century non-

biblical mention of Jesus is entirely inauthentic. Even the much-revered OCD thinks little of it, declaring that "The famous *testimonium* to Jesus is partly or even wholly an interpolation".[609] It may also be worth questioning whether modern scholars have become more receptive to the passage being partly – rather than wholly – fabricated, just as the historical value of the Gospels diminishes. In other words, "If we don't have Josephus, what do we have?!"

Though Josephus devotes more time to John the Baptist than to Jesus, there is a second passage about the latter, also from *Antiquities of the Jews*:

> Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned… Whereupon Albinus… wrote in anger to Ananus, and threatened that he would bring him to punishment for what he had done; on which king Agrippa took the high priesthood from him, when he had ruled but three months, and made Jesus, the son of Damneus, high priest.[610]

Apart from the phrase "called Christ", this passage does not seem to offer any support for Jesus' historical existence. The Jesus mentioned here need not necessarily be Jesus of Nazareth. After all Jesus (or Joshua) and James (or Jacob) are very common Jewish names; and there are quite a few people named Jesus mentioned in the works of Josephus. In fact, soon after the "called Christ" reference, Josephus makes mention of "Jesus, the son of Damneus", a former high priest. It could be that this is the Jesus referenced earlier, as mythicists speculate, and this would explain why James' brother is mentioned; the high priest being a noteworthy figure.[611]

Hoffmann is one mainstream Biblical scholar who also believed "called Christ" is a Christian interpolation and that this passage merely discusses Jesus bar Damneus.[612] The worth of this passage hinges on the authenticity of the phrase "called Christ". If this is a Christian interpolation (possibly in whole, as suggested by Earl Doherty who notes that Ananus is spoken of critically here, yet Josephus seems to think highly of him in his *The Jewish War*),[613] this passage offers nothing on

Jesus' historicity. It may also be possible that this James merely called himself the brother of Jesus Christ, much as Josephus' reference to Caligula styling himself, "brother of Jupiter".[614]

Interestingly, even if "called Christ" was genuine (keep in mind the influence of Eusebius), there is no necessary link to Jesus of Nazareth; there were many Jesuses in first century Palestine, and perhaps a few of them claimed to be or were perceived as being Messiahs. It cannot be reasonably assumed that any Jesus or Joshua who is called a Messiah or Christ must relate to the allegedly historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, as the Historical Jesus was apparently a very insignificant historical figure, barely mentioned – if at all – in contemporary or near-contemporary historical accounts. And surely the high priest is more worthy of mention than yet another relatively insignificant itinerant apocalyptic preacher! Historicists can't have it both ways. If they are going to assert that the Historical Jesus was very insignificant during his lifetime, they need to accept the evidential uncertainties appropriate for such insignificance.

Given that this book does show signs of tampering (that is, in the *Testimonium Flavianum*), it would not seem all that unlikely, or difficult, that two (but very important) words were inserted into the text by an over-eager Christian scribe. Perhaps it was included in an early copy as a speculative footnote, and was later incorporated into the body of the text. This is made all the more possible by the fact that all copies of these Josephean works have their origins in the Medieval period, at the earliest, lovingly preserved by Christians, since Jews had no interest in preserving the works of Emperor Vespasian's lickspittle. It is interesting to note, however, that the phrase "called Christ" is less assertive than the "was Christ" of the first passage. This would seemingly conflict with the *Testimonium Flavianum*, but would also perhaps be a more likely statement from a non-Christian. Even this doesn't seem to favour authenticity much, as "called Christ" is also found in Matthew 1:16 and other Christian writings. Perhaps that is even more reason to suspect that Josephus' book was tampered with, by fans of the Gospels![615]

It is also interesting to note that the second Josephean passage on Jesus is of less importance than the first. If the first passage is genuine, the

second is far less detailed and noteworthy. If the *Testimonium Flavianum* is fraudulent, it is also possible that the second passage is fraudulent. Indeed, with the possible or likely fraudulent nature of the first passage, the second passage potentially raises questions as to who Josephus thinks this "Christ" is, given that he had otherwise not mentioned him. So we have plenty of reason to be doubtful. While there are disagreements over the authenticity of these verses, it is important to realise that even if authentic, these verses do not necessarily confirm the existence of the Historical Jesus.

Apart from the general limitations shared by virtually all extra-Biblical sources already mentioned, a precedent for discussion of mythical and supernatural characters is potentially set by Josephus' references to Hercules (which could also be referring to a historical Hercules).[616] Josephus also seems happy to refer to the supernatural, retelling a story about how Onias prayed for rain, with his god positively responding.[617] Josephus goes on to claim that he witnessed Eleazar draw out a demon from a possession victim's nostrils, with the aid of his trusty ring of power.[618] If critical historians are expected to accept Josephus without question when it comes to his questionable Jesus references, perhaps his witness to the existence of gods and demons should also be accepted without question. While there are certainly 'good' historians of the ancient world, they still pale in comparison to modern standards.[619] And they certainly weren't immune to making stuff up, and, like Ehrman, to inventing sources whole cloth.[620]

It is obvious that Jesus is not the only ancient figure claimed to have performed miracles, nor is Josephus the only historian to have documented miracles. There are so many references, we cannot possibly go through them all. For example, our beloved Arrian recalls Ptolemy's account of talking snakes, seemingly happy "to assert with confidence that some divine assistance was afforded him [a very lost Alexander]".[621] Consider also the miracles of Emperor Vespasian, who supposedly cured blind and lame people. These miracles were reported, at the very least, by Tacitus (*Histories* 4.81), Cassius Dio (*Roman History* 65.8), and Suetonius (*Life of Vespasian* 7.2). And Seneca casually describes the goings-on in Heaven, whilst ordering us to not question his sources![622] Surely the

testimony of these (more than one) actual, named, and qualified historians/authors is better evidence[623] than what we have for Jesus, and yet such miraculous and supernatural claims are easily dismissed by believer and non-believer alike.

And if these historians' sources can invent such miraculous and improbable events, we should certainly not think it impossible that they could also invent a person's existence, especially since it is far easier to convince people of the existence of a mundane person, than it is to convince them of grandiose miracle claims. In other words, if we can – and we should[624] – doubt the veridicality of the sources behind the works of these famous historians, we can certainly doubt the veridicality of the unknown sources to the unknown and polemical Gospel authors, for matters both incredible and mundane.

It is also noteworthy that while scholars understand Josephus could not have been an eyewitness to any event of Jesus' life, he fails to mention his sources for his information on Jesus. If authentic in the first place, it may never be known whether Josephus received accurate information from official government records, which seems unlikely if the Historical Jesus really was insignificant, or whether the information is simply hearsay from Christian believers. If it is rare for ancient historians such as Josephus to name their sources (it isn't), scholars simply need to accept this limitation, and accept the resulting uncertainty, rather than lower the standards of evidence and critical thinking for convenience. Jesus doesn't miraculously get a free pass. And neither does the historicist wishing to rely on Josephus.

Finally, note the perceived importance of Josephus' testimony. If it can be dismissed, and I think there is ample reason to do just that, then we do not have any non-Christian historical sources for Jesus that date from the first century BCE or the first century CE.

Tacitus

In his *Annals*, Roman historian Tacitus, in the second century CE, makes a possible reference to Jesus:

> Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.[625]

It is the phrase in the middle of this passage, referring to Christus and his death under Pontius Pilate that is of great interest. It could be that this phrase (or even the whole passage) is also a later Christian interpolation. While some scholars could argue that this passage must be genuine because it does not portray Christians and Christ in a totally positive manner (much like the Talmudic references to Jesus), there are reasons to have doubts over the authenticity or legitimacy of this passage. For example, it is interesting that the name 'Jesus', 'Jesus, son of Joseph' or 'Jesus of Nazareth' is never used, and that this is Tacitus' only reference to Jesus.

It is questionable if a non-Christian historian would refer to this person as 'Christ' (a term of religious significance to Christians), rather than the more secular 'Jesus of Nazareth'.[626] A Christian scribe however, would have no issue in calling him 'Christ'. Given that 'Jesus' is not specified, there may also be a small possibility that this could refer to another 'Christ' or messiah-figure. It is also questionable if this great historian would have referred to a handful of Christians in Rome as an 'immense multitude'. Though *Annals* covers the period of Rome's history from around 14 CE to 66 CE, no other mention is made of 'Jesus Christ'.[627] This passage is also ignored by early Christian apologists such as Origen and Tertullian, who actually quotes Tacitus in the third century.[628] It surely must be significant that the most important Pagan source concerning Jesus was ignored for many centuries!

Tacitus, born after Jesus' death (and perhaps after Paul started writing his epistles), could not have been an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. He could well be repeating what a Christian believer is claiming. Indeed, the historicist Ehrman also somewhat dismisses Tacitus' witness as Christian hearsay.[629] There is also some question over Tacitus' reliability as historian, particularly when he calls the prefect Pontius Pilate a procurator, although he could possibly have been both.[630] Also of interest is that this supposed reference to the death of Jesus is made in Book 15 (covering 62-65 CE), rather than in Book 5 (covering 29-31 CE). Though Tacitus supposedly claims the death of Christ happened during the reign of Tiberius, Tacitus makes no mention of Jesus in the books he wrote covering the reign of Tiberius; he only makes this one comment among the books covering the reign of Nero.

Furthermore, most of Book 5 and the beginning of Book 6 (covering CE32-37) is lost. The *Annals* is suspiciously missing information from 29 CE to 32 CE, a highly relevant timeframe for those that believe (historically or religiously) in Jesus. It is equally suspicious that the *only* section missing in the space dedicated to Tiberius' rule happens to coincide with what many Christians would consider to be the most historically noteworthy event(s) to occur during Tiberius' reign.[631] Professor of Classics Robert Drews theorises that the only plausible explanation for this gap is "pious fraud"; that the embarrassment of Tacitus making no mention of Jesus' crucifixion (or associated events such as the darkness covering the world[632] or the appearances of resurrected saints)[633] led to Christian scribes destroying this portion of the text (and perhaps later fabricating the Book 15 reference).[634]

Richard Carrier further argues that Tacitus' later discussion on Christianity (in his coverage of 64 CE) gives historians confidence that this gap cannot be merely explained by the removal of embarrassing claims made about Jesus (with the silence potentially being the most embarrassing point of all), and points to missing books by Philo and another suspicious gap in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*.[635] Despite Cassius Dio (a Roman historian of the second and third centuries) having elsewhere discussed King Herod's death,[636] *Roman History* is missing the years from 6 BCE to 2 BCE. It could be that Christian embarrassment

over the lack of mention of Jesus' birth (and associated events as mentioned in the Gospels, such as the 'Massacre of the Innocents')[637] led Christians to remove this portion of the text. Historians can speculate as to how coincidental it could be that historical works preserved in the hands of Christians would be specifically missing years coinciding with Jesus' birth and death;[638] these sections would presumably be the most precious and protected.

Justin Martyr, when supposedly arguing with Trypho (who several scholars think did not exist), interestingly fails to mention the Tacitean passage (as well as the Josephean passages), relying instead on "doctrines that are inspired by the Divine Spirit".[639] It could be argued that Trypho, being a Jew, would have been more convinced by references to the Jewish god and Jewish doctrine, though contemporary or historical references (Josephus also being Jewish) surely would have bolstered Justin Martyr's case. Recall the significance that Josephus and Tacitus bestow scholars with the earliest non-Christian references to Jesus. Unfortunately, the best manuscripts date to the Middle Ages, when the power (and perhaps corruption) of the Roman church was at its zenith, so it cannot be known just how much Christian scribes may have manipulated them during the intervening centuries:

> As with Josephus, so with Tacitus our observation must be tempered by the fact that the earliest manuscript of the *Annals* comes from the 11th century.[640]

There is yet more reason to suggest that the Tacitean passage is a later forgery. It bears resemblances to Sulpicius Severus' much later description of the Great Fire of Rome.[641] The Christian Severus mentions how Nero blamed and punished the Christians, yet neglects to mention Christ. It seems significant that the non-Christian Tacitus mentions Christ here, while the Christian Severus does not. Severus' very next chapter describes how Titus decided to destroy the Temple, to hurt the Jews and the Christians.[642] Severus' contemporary, Paulus Orosius, describes the same passage about the Temple, though it lacks any mention of Christians.[643]

It's all about the Jews. With edited and selectively preserved manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages, describing what supposedly happened in the first century, but originally written in the subsequent centuries, with the aid of unknown sources, trying to figure out what really happened is very challenging. Yet, it is not unthinkable that Severus, or someone similar, borrowed from Orosius, added some inauthentic material about Christians being persecuted, followed by Severus, or someone similar, who then borrowed from Severus to add the little discussion of Christ in Tacitus' *Annals*. We already know that later Christians did just this sort of thing, partly motivated by embarrassment over the lack of historical mentions about Jesus.

Finally, as with Josephus, even Tacitus' reliability can be questioned, such as when he claimed that "the bird known as the phoenix visited Egypt".[644] I know of no Christian or secular historicist who thinks that the phoenix does exist, and did visit Egypt, simply because Tacitus (and a few others – it is multiply attested!) said so. And of course, if we can doubt an ancient historian like Tacitus, surely we can doubt – and to an even greater extent – the anonymous polemicists who gave us the Gospels. Especially in light of the problems shared by all these extrabiblical sources, there is simply nothing convincing here.

Thallus (and Phlegon)

The ninth-century Byzantine historian George Syncellus allegedly quotes third-century Christian chronicler Sextus Julius Africanus (whose works are lost), who allegedly quoted second-century (possibly first-century) historian Thallus (whose works are also lost). According to Syncellus, Julius Africanus said the following:

> On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and the rest of the world were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his *History*, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. For the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on the 14th day according to the moon, and the passion of our Savior falls on the day before the Passover; but an eclipse of the sun takes place only when the moon comes under the sun… Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth…[645]

Thallus, of whom little is known, allegedly mentioned a “darkness”, which Christians may like to think refers to the darkness around the time of Jesus’ death.[646] Historians cannot be sure that Thallus mentioned Jesus, when Thallus may have mentioned Jesus, that Africanus’ account is trustworthy, and that Syncellus is accurately reporting Africanus’ words. This is at least a third-hand report, making implausible claims, and appearing centuries after Jesus’ death; thus, it offers nothing convincing in establishing Jesus’ historicity. Africanus also comments on Greek historian Phlegon (reported among the works of Syncellus and Origen), which generally shares the same issues as with the Thallus passage.[647] When we have copies of first century documents concerning Jesus, we certainly don’t need to appeal to *possible* second century mentions in writings that are no longer extant.

Pliny, Suetonius and Mara Bar Serapion

There exist a handful of indefinite (they do not name Jesus of Nazareth for example) reports that add very little to the debate of Jesus’ historical existence. In his second-century discussions with Emperor Trajan, Roman author Pliny the Younger (61 CE – ca. 112 CE) made some references to Christians, such as the following:

> They affirmed the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they met on a stated day before it was light, and addressed a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity… but all I could discover was evidence of an absurd and extravagant superstition.[648]

Praying to what seems to be a ‘divine’ Christ (or any other activity directed towards such a Christ) says nothing of whether Christ existed or not, any more than worshipping a god/person in any other religion would prove the existence of that god/person. As with the Tacitean passage, the identity of the Christ (i.e. Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus bar Joseph) is not made explicit. Even historicist Bart Ehrman acknowledges that Pliny does not provide evidence that confirms the Historical Jesus.[649] However, if authentic, these passages could very well confirm the existence of first-century Christians; but that is not at all surprising.

From Suetonius' (ca. 70 CE – ca. 130 CE) *Life of Claudius*:

> Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.[650]

Chrestus is a Greek-derived proper name, meaning 'good', so does not necessarily have to refer to Jesus. What word/name is actually used here is controversial, due to the numerous variant manuscript readings. After a recent and exhaustive examination of the relevant manuscripts, Jobjorn Boman concludes: "Accordingly, I, in agreement with the modern editions of *De Vita Caesarum,* conclude that the original Suetonian spelling of the word in fact was *Chresto*."[651] *Chresto* is equivalent to the proper name *Chrestus*, rather than the title of *Christ*. Boman discovered that the majority of early manuscripts indicate a proper name, while the few manuscripts that allude to the title 'Christ' are typically late, asserting that "it can be concluded that the occasional Christ-spellings in the MSS most likely are the conjectures by Christian scribes or scholars".[652] In other words, it is likely that Christian manipulation of Suetonius' manuscripts may be responsible for the readings that seem to support Jesus' historicity.

Note also that while many early Christians were undoubtedly Jews, Christians are not specified in this passage. But what Jesus has to do with Jews in Rome is anyone's guess. Furthermore, surely the (belief in a) Celestial Jesus could also inspire his followers to take action. In any case, this passage offers little to no information about a historical Jesus of Nazareth, as even historicists are prepared to admit.[653]

From a letter by Syrian philosopher Mara bar Serapion, to his son, scholars find:

> For what benefit did the Athenians obtain by putting Socrates to death, seeing that they received as retribution for it famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, seeing that in one hour the whole of their country was covered with sand? Or the Jews by the murder of their Wise King, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven away from them? For with justice did God grant a recompense to the wisdom of all three of them. For the Athenians died by famine; and the people of Samos were covered by the sea without remedy; and the Jews, brought to desolation and expelled from their kingdom, are driven away into every land. Nay, Socrates did "not" die, because of Plato; nor yet Pythagoras, because of the statue of Hera; nor yet the Wise King, because of the new laws which he enacted.[654]

There is no reference here to a ‘Jesus’ or a ‘Christ’, but only to an unnamed “wise king”. Furthermore, the historical philosophers Pythagoras and Socrates are specifically named, unlike the unknown “wise king”. This passage also seems to blame the Jews for murdering this figure, while the canonical Gospels claim that it was the Romans who killed Jesus,[655] although “the Jews” could also be seen to be responsible.[656] Doherty also questions the likelihood that a pagan writer such as Mara would place the supposedly insignificant Jesus on the same level as “household names” such as Socrates and Pythagoras.[657] Again, there is nothing decisive here. We must acknowledge that the ancient non-Christian sources, where genuine, being relatively late, do not attest to the existence of Jesus, but to the belief in Jesus’ existence.

The Talmud

There are a number of references to various characters called Jesus in the Jewish Talmud (specifically from the *Gemara*), which may or may not reference Jesus of Nazareth.[658] Given that the *Gemara* is among the latest of all these sources (around the fifth and sixth centuries), and is a religious text that possibly makes use of other religious texts (such as the canonical Gospels and the Old Testament scriptures), it seemingly offers little to no useful information with regards to the historical Jesus.[659] One factor that may support the Talmud’s use is the unflattering portrayal of Jesus, rather than no Jesus at all; though that would depend on knowing that these are indeed references to Jesus of Nazareth. This cannot be known with certainty as Jesus/Joshua/Yeshua/Yeshu is a very common Jewish/Aramaic name, found often in the Talmud and among the works of Josephus, as evidenced by mentions to Jesus ben Pandira, Jesus bar Phabet, and Jesus bar Gamaliel.[660]

The Less Interesting Books of the New Testament

Compared to the earlier works by Paul who provides the earliest sources of information about Jesus, and the Gospels (which offer the most

complete accounts of his life), it is widely accepted that the remainder of the New Testament (namely the apocalyptic book of Revelation and the general – and forged – epistles) offer very little in the way of useful information on the Historical Jesus.[661] They have little to say regarding the Historical Jesus, and it is possible that in general, later religious writings (both Biblical and extra-Biblical) could simply be borrowing from and embellishing on the information in the gospels and the writings of Paul. And as with all the other sources, there are no extant primary sources with which to validate the few claims made by the remainder of the New Testament.

One example of the lack of information on the historical Jesus among the general epistles is provided by the epistle of James (possibly the 'brother of Jesus', though he never claims to be). James fails to provide details of the historical Jesus, including his death; he also seems uninterested in Jesus' alleged resurrection.[662] Religious Studies scholar Matt Jackson-McCabe recognises this and alludes to James placing far greater importance on the *parousia* (presence or arrival) of the 'heavenly Christ':

> In James, "Jesus saves" not through his death and resurrection, but only to the extent that his heavenly *parousia* will signal the destruction of the wicked oppressors of God's elect and the establishment of the long-promised era of blessedness for the righteous… The Letter of James evidences a variant early Christian myth that, while different from the death-and-resurrection-centered one that is reflected in much of the extant Christian literature, is consistent in significant respects with other Jewish messianic thinking in the early Roman period.[663]

Not only does James' portrayal of Jesus in one of the earliest Christian writings leave open the possibility that 'his' Jesus is a heavenly or 'celestial figure', he also provides insight into the fragmentary nature of early Christianity.[664] These 'Jamesian Christians' seem less interested in Christ's ultimate redemptive act for all of mankind, and more interested in national restoration, "the reestablishment of a twelve-tribe kingdom" by a vengeful, heavenly being.[665] Now the real discussion over the evidence for Jesus undoubtedly involves the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. We shall first deal with what are widely considered to be the fullest accounts of Jesus' life.

The Canonical Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke-Acts and John

Like the other sources, the four canonical Gospels cannot be considered to be primary sources. They were written around forty or more years after the posited death of Jesus,[666] which could also eliminate the possibility of them being written by eyewitnesses, long after the fact (considering life expectancies in the first century). I cannot stress this point enough. The Gospels provide us with the views of 'the next generation' of Christians, with the founders and leaders of the faith most likely all deceased, due to old age, or calamities such as the destruction of Jerusalem. The gospel authors are anonymous, so it cannot simply be presumed that they are eyewitnesses or even well informed.[667]

The only Gospel which even gives a clue as to who may have written it is the gospel of John ("the disciple whom Jesus loved"),[668] which still does not provide a name, or a list of the author's credentials or previous works, and is the latest of the four canonical Gospels.[669] Strangely enough, if we accept the traditional authorship, we have an eyewitness that doesn't write like an eyewitness – Matthew – unashamedly plagiarising the words of a non-eyewitness – Mark – which should surely raise eyebrows.[670] It is as if Matthew, crucial as he was to the nascent faith, forgot everything he knew about Jesus, so had to check in with a person that never met him,[671] and dishonestly failed to give due credit. A moot point, as we have little reason to accept later Church traditions regarding authorship, or, just about anything else. They are obviously bogus.

Of course, the importance of knowing the author in regards to determining reliability and potential bias (and perhaps the genre of the work, which is discussed later) need not be seriously questioned. Consider if viewers, particularly atheistic and liberal viewers, should simply trust all the pontificating of narrow-minded 'newsreaders' like Bill O'Reilly. Surely even contemporary news can be doubted. History is like a much older form of news. So shouldn't we then be even *more* doubtful, as there are problems with memory, methods, and the difficulty in making comparisons with the foundational sources? You might think that the historian is highly qualified and does much better work than contemporary

journalists and reporters, so we can trust them. But is this true of the Gospel authors? What are their qualifications? Can we be sure that these clearly biased authors are even historians? We don't even know their names!

Historians will find that they cannot determine the reliability of the secondary sources that are the Gospels by comparing them with the primary sources. The gospel writers do not even claim to be using trustworthy primary sources, nor do they name them – nor do they show scepticism with these hypothetical sources or demonstrate any critical methodology whatsoever. Even if they did, scholars do not have access to the alleged primary sources, and thus have no way to determine with certainty, if the gospels are truly reliable. While mythicists would be expected to criticise the gospels, historicists also take issue with them. As mentioned earlier, Jesus historicist Bart Ehrman describes the gospels as: few, relying upon each other, written decades after the alleged events, problematic, contradictory, biased, and written by anonymous authors who were not eyewitnesses. He says that the gospels are not the kind of sources historians would want in establishing what probably happened in the past. [672]

In his book, *Lost Christianities*, Ehrman mentions that the gospels lack first-person narrative, and lack any claim of being companions of eyewitnesses.[673] He goes on to say that most scholars have abandoned the Church-given identifiers of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and notes that the Gospels are anonymous works. When it comes to these third-person narratives, readers could be forgiven for thinking that the gospel writers seem more like omniscient narrators (akin to authors of fiction), even when they speak of events in Jesus' life when he was alone, such as the temptation in the wilderness or the prayer at Gethsemane – clearly indicating yet more 'mundane fictions'.[674] This could be a crucial issue; if the gospels are not meant to be taken literally, sifting through them with criteria to determine what could be authentic and historical may well be an exercise in time-wasting, and scholars (and also believers) might inadvertently ignore the true meaning and purpose of the gospels in the process.

With regards to hypothetical sources that are esteemed by scholars such as Ehrman,[675] it is important to realise that they are not extant; if they ever existed at all, their contents cannot now be verified. With regards to the miraculous and supernatural claims found in the Gospels, such as the virgin birth, and Jesus' walking on water; [676] both historicists and mythicists find them to be problematic. Ehrman correctly asserts that history can only deal with what is most likely (while miracles are by their very nature, unlikely), while Robert M. Price and many other scholars make use of the principle of analogy. Essentially, claims that are not analogous to what scientists and scholars currently know of the world (such as the laws of physics) can be dismissed by the historian.

While the Gospels are anonymous, meaning that we cannot be sure of the authors' reliability or motives, their supernatural claims make it easy for critical scholars to see them as being far from secular and sober historians who have no intention to evangelize. If these supernatural claims are indeed false, and historians remain critical and consistent, it is reasonable to avoid accepting them "as gospel",[677] especially when there are no extant primary sources to determine the accuracy and validity of these works. Many scholars (including historicists) have commented on mythic parallels between Jesus' story as told in the Gospels, and the stories of earlier gods and mythical heroes. While not necessarily eliminating a historical core behind the Jesus story, it could be of interest to determine just how much of the gospel story could be borrowed from earlier and contemporary works. This also serves to highlight much within that is obviously mythical or non-historical, if not borrowed.[678]

The more that can be dismissed from the gospel story as being inauthentic, the more reason there is to question whether that which remains must be a true and accurate account of actual historical events. We earlier saw the folly in utilising the various criteria for authenticity, such as the criterion of independent attestation. Mark is considered be the earliest of the four Gospels, with Matthew and Luke borrowing heavily from it.[679] Reliable historians that they are, Matthew and Luke didn't even bother to credit Mark; few seem to stress this clear plagiarism. John appears later and seems to be 'borrowing' from the Synoptic Gospels. Given this information, and the fact that the Gospels are anonymous, it

would be over-reaching to claim that a particular saying or action of Jesus is authentic because of ‘multiple independent attestation’. It is hard to see why mainstream scholars can be so certain over Jesus historicity, when they admit how questionable the Gospels are:

> When it comes to the historical question about the Gospels, I adopt a mediating position – that is, these are religious records, close to the sources, but they are not in accordance with modern historiographic requirements or professional standards.[680]

Our beloved Bart Ehrman also points out the biases and contradictions of the Gospel authors:

> It is also true that our best sources about Jesus, the early Gospels, are riddled with problems. These were written decades after Jesus’ life by biased authors who are at odds with one another on details up and down the line.[681]

Gager also criticises the Gospels as unreliable sources for the historical Jesus:

> The Gospels are the final products of a long and creative tradition, and the earliest Gospel (for most Mark, for some Matthew) is customarily dated about forty years after the death of Jesus. During these years not only was old material reworked, expanded, collated, and reinterpreted, but new material was regularly interpolated. Eschatological pronouncements of Christian prophets, ex post facto predictions, Old Testament proof texts, and ethical maxims were attributed to Jesus and thereby “authorized” for believers. [682]

That the Gospels seem uninterested in history is a common notion amongst my fellow Religious Studies scholars:

> In the case of *historical* Jesus research, however, the ultimate motivations of the work and its methods may be so ill-founded and self-contradictory as to render the entre enterprise illegitimate from an academic perspective… the nature of our sources for Jesus exacerbates the situation. While the object of our supposedly “historical” inquiry keeps transforming into a theological entity in front of our very eyes, the main sources on which we base our reconstructions present him as a theological entity in the first place… In seeking to find the real, historical person behind these narratives, we are using these texts as sources for a figure that they themselves show no interest in at all. Just as the myths and legends about Herakles are simply not *about* a historical person, so also the Gospels are not *about* the historical Jesus.[683]

To briefly summarise on what scholars lack with regards to the evidence of Jesus' historicity: the Gospels make mention of Jesus' humble birth, his teaching of elders, his teaching of multitudes, his healing of the sick, his casting out of demons, his raising of Lazarus from the dead, his being raised from the dead by God, his glorious entry into Jerusalem, his clashes with the Roman and Jewish authorities, his death, his triumphant return, and many other wonderful and much-cherished stories. Of all this, and other detail of Jesus' life, miraculous or mundane, there is not a single secular, contemporary, eyewitness account. Perhaps this is why Robert Funk, noted Biblical scholar and co-founder of the *Jesus Seminar*,[684] admitted the following:

> As an historian, I do not know for certain that Jesus really existed, that he is anything more than the figment of some overactive imaginations… In my view, there is nothing about Jesus of Nazareth that we can know beyond any possible doubt. In the mortal life we have there are only probabilities. And the Jesus that scholars have isolated in the ancient gospels, gospels that are bloated with the will to believe, may turn out to be only another image that merely reflects our deepest longings.[685]

While issues with the gospels are certainly not enough to rule out the possibility that there was a historical Jesus behind the gospel story, it also cannot be said with certainty that there must have been one. The lack of primary sources and the problems with the Gospel stories alone, would seemingly justify having some doubt. All I have done so far is provide some general reasons for why we should be heavily doubtful over the reliability of these sources. But most disturbing of all, consider that the object of our investigation is not the Biblical/Gospel Jesus. We are looking for the Historical Jesus. Which Jesus do the Gospels/Acts speak of? The Gospel Jesus, of course.

The Gospels do not tell the story of the historicists' Historical Jesus; nor do they tell the story of many mythicists' Celestial Jesus. These relatively late mixtures of myth and (at least what purports, or is purported, to be) history tell the story of the Gospel Jesus. Now both camps assert that their Jesus evolved, into the Gospel Jesus. The original story, as seen by both camps, evolved into the Gospel story. In other words, *the Gospels are exactly the sources we would expect on both theories*. This is crucial. We would expect them if Jesus was a historical

figure that became mythicised, or a purely mythical/celestial figure that became historicised. We must remember that the most sophisticated mythicists don't just say that Jesus didn't exist, which would seemingly be contradicted by sources such as the Gospels. They say that the belief in a Celestial Jesus lies at the origins of Christianity, so that *later* sources like the Gospels are not at all unexpected; they pose no difficulties at all to such mythicists' theories.[686] I'll have much more to say about this intellectual threesome later.

Mark's Burden

Another crucial issue is the centrality of Mark's gospel. While some of the epistles (by Paul or author authors) may make earlier references to Jesus, Mark's gospel is the first *somewhat* complete (though most of the childhood and adulthood of Jesus is missing) narrative of Jesus' life, and arguably, the first to place Jesus in a historical setting. The epistles have very little to say about Jesus' life, and according to some scholars may be alluding to a very different Jesus. *Q* is a hypothetical source, and along with the *Gospel of Thomas* (which could have originated in some form in the first century, between Paul's first writings and Mark's Gospel),[687] generally contains only sayings, rather than detailed narrative.[688]

If the epistles and sayings documents may be inauthentic, lack biographical detail, or are referring to a non-earthly Jesus, the gospels are crucial in establishing Jesus as a literal human being in a specific historical (and earthly) setting. Given that the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John come after and likely expand on Mark's gospel, the reliability of Mark's gospel as historical testimony is paramount. It is no wonder that Ehrman indicates that the Gospels make the best testimony to Jesus' life, [689] while Carrier expresses doubt on all sources post-Mark, Biblical or extra-Biblical, as Mark could have "tainted" them all.[690] If Mark's gospel (and perhaps Matthew's, Luke's and John's) is not meant to be understood as a sober and objective biography, establishing a historical Jesus becomes even more challenging. Whether Mark can live up to its prominent position is examined after some brief comments about the Gospels' genre.

The Genre of the Gospels

According to ardent historicist Bart Ehrman, the New Testament gospels are "our best historical sources" with regards to information on Jesus' life.[691] If they were intended to be accurate historical biographies, they no doubt deserve serious consideration. If they were not intended to present accurate historical information, then significant doubt about the entire Jesus story (rather than just the supernatural and otherwise implausible elements) is justifiable. It is not a foregone conclusion that the canonical Gospels are historically reliable biographies. A number of scholars demonstrate that there truly is no consensus that these gospels are very accurate and reliable.

Given the anonymity of the Gospels (among other problems) it may never be known with certainty what genre they fall into, how reliable the authors were, what the authors' intentions really were, and crucially, whether they intended readers to take them at face value.[692] While conservative Christian believers may prefer to accept these books as accurate in all aspects, and sceptics may want to dismiss them entirely, mainstream Biblical scholars tend to fall somewhere in the middle. Furthermore, there is no complete agreement amongst academics over what genre the Gospels actually fall into.[693] Noted mythicist Robert M. Price leaves no confusion as to his position, claiming that Jesus' life story as portrayed in the Gospels echoes that of the "Mythic Hero Archetype" (alluding to numerous parallel plot elements found in the stories of many mythical hero characters):

> The Gospel story itself is pure legend. What can we say of a supposed historical figure whose life story conforms virtually in every detail to the Mythic Hero Archetype, with nothing, no "secular" or mundane information, left over?[694]

Bona fide biblical scholar Thomas L. Thompson says the assumption that the Gospels portray a historical Jesus is not justified.[695] Mythicists are clearly not alone in having doubts as to the gospels' reliability. Professor of Literature Randel Helms says that the Gospels are largely fictional accounts of a historical Jesus[696] and also dismisses the idea

that oral tradition can be trusted, calling it unstable, and open to mythical and fictional embellishment.[697] John Dominic Crossan also expresses some reservations about the gospels' reliability, saying that oral tradition is something that has been abused in scholarship.[698] He further remarks:

> The first gospel, Mark, is around the year 70. So within 70 and, say, 95, we have the four gospels. 25 years. But that leaves 70 to 30. 40 years before that. If you watch the creativity within that 25 year span, from Mark being copied into Matthew and Luke, possibly also by John, then you have to face the creativity of that 40 years, even when you don't have written gospels. And that may be equally intense.[699]

Crossan elaborates on what he means by "creativity", explaining that the Gospels contain fabrications and mythology.[700] He also notes that the gospels are problematic, due to their many contradictions.[701] Harold Attridge, a professor of New Testament, proclaims that early Christians understood the stories allegorically:

> Early Christians certainly read scripture allegorically, understanding it to refer to some kind of so-called higher realities that weren't really present in the text itself. They could interpret it morally, as giving advice for life.[702]

Historian of religion Paula Fredriksen bluntly says that the Gospels are not biographies:

> The gospels are very peculiar types of literature. They're not biographies. I mean, there are all sorts of details about Jesus that they're simply not interested in giving us. They are a kind of religious advertisement. What they do is proclaim their individual author's interpretation of the Christian message through the device of using Jesus of Nazareth as a spokesperson for the evangelist's position.[703]

Robert M. Price asserts that the New Testament Gospels (and Acts) are a kind of Old Testament *midrash* or exegesis.[704] He essentially sees the gospels as a later re-imagining of the old scripture, which is something pre-Christian Jews were quite fond of.[705] This idea that the gospels refer more to the Old Testament (or even other ancient sources) rather than to recent and actual events could make sense of the Apostle Paul's reference to Jesus' death and resurrection "according to the Scriptures", rather than "according to validated eyewitness accounts", as we shall see. [706] This idea also gives a more naturalistic explanation for the near-miraculous number of Old Testament prophecies that Jesus supposedly

fulfilled.[707] Price notes that this midrashic tendency is evident even from the very first verses of the first canonical gospel:

> The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" – "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"[708]

One example cited by Price is the story of Jesus' 'stilling of the storm' in Mark 4:35-41. He argues that the basis for the story can be found in Jonah 1:4-6, where Jonah (like Jesus) can be found sleeping during the ordeal, and eventually led to the stilling of the storm.[709] Price then theorises that Mark's passage was elaborated by another storm story provided by Psalms 107:23-29. Price finds direct parallels between John's 'water into wine' story (John 2:1-11) and the Septuagint's account of 1Kings 17:8-24. He points out that both stories involve a rebuke, empty pitchers (from which "sustenance miraculously emerges"), and people placing their faith in the central character because of this feat.[710]

Price demonstrates many more examples of Old Testament parallels (and potential sources of extrapolation) with the Gospel narratives, including: the nativity of Jesus, Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptations, the recruitment of the first disciples, the exorcism at Capernaum, the healing of a leper, the healing of a paralytic, the walking on the sea, Jesus' transfiguration, and the entry into Jerusalem. Parallels are also found with Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, the last supper, the idea of a scapegoat, Jesus' crucifixion, the empty tomb, Jesus' ascension, Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch, and Paul's conversion.[711]

Price provides many more examples and alludes to many other parallels that various scholars have speculated on.[712] Carrier highlights many parallels between the story of 'Daniel in the lion's den' and the Gospels' 'empty tomb' story, demonstrating mathematically why it is more likely that this Jesus tradition was fabricated.[713] Carrier also notes that, "Biographies were also written of non-existent people (like Romulus, Numa, Coriolanus, Hercules, and Aesop)."[714] In fact, just as there are parallels with the stories about the Biblical Jesus and older Jewish scriptures, so too are there parallels with pagan figures/religions.

Such characters might be historical or mythical, human or supernatural, contemporary or earlier. That there may be shared motifs between the central figure of Christianity and 'pagan' characters is today an unpopular theory among both conservative[715] and secular Biblical scholars.[716] This can cause confusion as some secular scholars admit to parallelism,[717] and important and influential early Christians not only admitted to these parallels, but attempted to convert pagans to Christianity by making reference to such parallels, and further assumed that demonic forces keen on confusing believers were responsible for them (diabolical mimicry).[718] Note that not only is the latter ridiculous, to believers (who should not think it possible that demons could uncover God's secrets, or that God would just let it happen) and non-believers (demons – enough said) alike, but it contradicts Paul who asserts that the demons didn't know about the great and mysterious plan – that's why they unknowingly killed Jesus and thereby stuffed everything up.[719]

That large parts of the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus might be influenced by other religions and philosophies, would not necessarily rule out the possibility that there still was a historical core behind the mythical embellishments. But these parallels allow for significant doubt over the sources used to establish Jesus' historicity; after all, with more and more of the story demonstrated as having borrowed from earlier fictions, the less certain we can be that there does exist a historical core. Now there were a number of contemporaries and near-contemporaries of Jesus, whose teachings, deeds or life events could have influenced the stories of Jesus of Nazareth.

According to Josephus, there were several healers, prophets, religious authorities and messiah-type figures alive during the first century, such as Eleazar the exorcist, John the Baptist, Onias the rain-maker, and Menahem the warrior-king.[720] Some of these figures were actually named "Jesus", such as Jesus ben Damneus – of the aforementioned Josephean passage on "James the brother of Jesus" – and Jesus ben Ananias, who is startlingly like our Jesus.[721] (If the 'real Jesus of history' turns out to be Jesus ben Ananias, then we have a figure that is not worthy of the name, being very different to the one portrayed in the Gospels and the stripped-down version

known as the Historical Jesus.) Philostratus' third century account of Apollonius of Tyana is reminiscent of Jesus' story as portrayed in the Gospels, as we can see with his miraculous healings;[722] ardent Jesus historicists like Bart Ehrman acknowledge this.[723]

Amateur claims have also been made of parallels between Mithraism and Christianity,[724] though many of these are attested to by sources that post-date the New Testament, which Christian scholars and apologists are all too happy to point out.[725] The dates of the sources, as well as the figures being contemporaneous do not necessarily allow for a convincing argument that Jesus' story was influenced by them. Nor is it particularly surprising if there are parallels between early Christianity and various Jewish traditions, given that Christianity stems from Judaism – though this can lead to evidence regarding precedent and motives with regards to the Celestial Jesus theory. More surprising claims of Christianity's possible influences are made by sources that are earlier, and pagan.

Historian of religion Petra Pakkanen is one scholar whose work helps identify Pagan influences on nascent Christianity. She has isolated four major trends in Hellenistic religion, in the centuries leading up to the beginning of Christianity, common among mystery religions: syncretism, monotheism (or progression towards monotheism, via henotheism), individualism and cosmopolitanism.[726] These trends (particularly syncretism) are found among various mystery religions, such as the Eleusinian Mysteries (containing Hellenistic and Phoenician elements), Mithraism (containing Hellenistic and Persian elements), and the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris (containing Hellenistic and Egyptian elements).

Christianity conforms to all four trends, and if we combined Hellenistic elements with Judaism, we would end up with a religion much like Christianity, and perhaps a saviour figure much like Paul's Christ and Philo's *Logos*. (Note that mystery religions offered dying-and-rising saviour figures, the possibility of a happy afterlife, baptisms, fictive kinship, and other things we just so happen to find in Christianity, such as ritualistic meals.)[727] That Christianity may have begun as – and not merely a copy of – a Jewish mystery religion is even more obvious when

we focus on Pauline Christianity, with Paul's writings devoid of narrative and other embellishments, whilst retaining the core elements of Christianity. This suddenly becomes crucially important when we realise that Paul's writings predate the Gospels, and that scholars are increasingly seeing Mark's Gospel as an allegorisation of Paul's teachings. Also note that all these mystery religions will be similar (necessarily), but different (also necessarily).

One example of Christianity's syncretism, particularly in the context of incorporating previous traditions' gods and key figures (in order to facilitate easier conversion, and to eliminate rivals) is the incorporation of John the Baptist into the Gospel story.[728] Note that religious – including Jewish, and most importantly, Christian – syncretism is a definite and observable phenomenon that no credible secular scholar would find controversial. Also keep in mind that if Christianity did begin life as a mystery religion, it is understandable that its origins are shrouded in secrecy – mystery religions were mysterious![729]

Interestingly, in discussing Egyptian – and other – mystery cults, Plutarch provides a curious interpretation of myths concerning Osiris, who apparently was killed and 'resurrected'. He explains that common people think that such gods had these great adventures on Earth, but rejects this, and further rejects explanations that they are exaggerated accounts of genuinely historical figures, or that these are completely allegorical and lacking any basis for literal truths; those in the know, such as Plutarch apparently, see the hidden truths that these intermediary divine beings (they are "midway between gods and men", perhaps in substance and in purpose, like someone we know) literally exist and do have their amazing adventures, but in other realms, in "regions above the earth and beneath the earth".[730]

It is not absurd to think that a similar same thing may have happened with the Christian faith. Christianity started out as a Jewish mystery cult, with 'elite' or 'initiated' Christians such as Paul and 'Mark' knowing full well that Jesus is an intermediary divine being, operating in another realm, whilst the unknowing commoners interpreted the allegorical tales (such as Mark's gospel) literally, and that these latter – and later – Christians would

become the dominant faction. In other words, the Gospel story is not literally true, as mainstream Christians believe. Nor are they exaggerations of the story of a mere mortal, as secular historicists believe. Nor are they intended to be completely fictional or allegorical, which would make for a plausible and naturalistic alternative. Nay, the Gospel stories were imagined as Earthly reinterpretations of literal events that occurred in a non-Earthly realm. In fact, not only is this all not absurd, the more we look at the sources, the more this all becomes blatantly obvious.

Carrier points to many other elements in common between Christianity and various mystery religions, such as the saviour god and the dying-and-rising god, referring to Romulus (whose death and resurrection was celebrated in annual passion plays), Zalmoxis (whose death and resurrection allowed eternal life for followers), and Osiris (whose death and resurrection allowed for salvation, via baptism) as the best examples.[731] Like Jesus, Osiris' death is also associated with the full moon,[732] and tradition holds that he returned on 'the third day'.[733] Interestingly, the well-known (to the Jews) pagan god Baal also died (being devoured by Mot) and triumphantly returned.[734] Also relevant is the influence of Zoroastrianism (popular with the ancient Persians, who conquered the Jewish lands) on Judaism and Christianity; the concepts of good vs. evil, heaven and hell, an evil 'god' (Angra Mainyu/Satan), a 'holy spirit', God's angelic servants, a future apocalypse, a new Earth, resurrections, and an important saviour figure, did not originate in a vacuum.[735] Suspiciously, these concepts tend not to be so prominent – if they are to be found at all – in the Jewish books written *before* the Persian conquest.

That such parallels are not necessarily overtly obvious or identical does not diminish the similarities or possible influences. If features between different religions were identical, it would no longer be mere emulation (it would simply be the same religion or story); scholars would expect adaptations partly caused by differing cultural norms in the forming of the new religion. Differences do not rule out influence. In fact, differences are *necessary*. Indeed, would it not be completely absurd to deny that Christianity was influenced by Judaism, because of the differences? And the differences may be the very reason for adapting and changing the original form, in the first place. That such non-existent

figures were often saviour gods, sons (or daughters) of a god, suffered for mankind, and inspired stories of themselves set on Earth (while originally being 'celestial beings', until the process of euhemerisation),[736] may reasonably give cause to doubt the existence of Jesus, whose most complete early sources portray him in a similar manner. The differences between Jesus and such mythical figures most definitely do not preclude our scepticism about him.

There are also parallels – both natural and supernatural – with other figures who may have been historical or ahistorical, many of which appear earlier than those from the Hellenistic period.[737] Jesus was not the only ancient figure to arrive on earth miraculously; the Buddha was said to have appeared out of his virgin mother's side,[738] and the mother of Perseus was impregnated by a high god, Zeus, by way of a golden shower.[739] While the tyrannical King Herod tried to kill the infant Jesus, afraid of the threat to his reign,[740] so too did the tyrannical King Kamsa attempt to kill the infant Krishna, whilst also killing numerous innocent babes.[741] While Jesus preached the so-called 'golden rule', so too did the Buddha[742] and Confucius.[743]

While Jesus first appears in the Gospels as a wise man (with no childhood or adolescence), Laozi also was said to have first appeared as a wise and mature man, ready to teach us unenlightened ones.[744] And like Jesus, Laozi also encouraged the loving of enemies.[745] Staying with Laozi, the apocryphal tale of 'his' Daodejing's creation seems to align somewhat with Jesus' bewailing the fact that prophets tend not to be so respected back home.[746] While Jesus was tempted by Satan, the Buddha was tempted by Mara[747] and Zoroaster by Ahriman.[748] While Jesus could miraculously produce wine, so too could Dionysus.[749] While Jesus was said to have walked on water (Matthew 14:22-33), so too is walking on water associated with the Buddha.[750] While Jesus was supposedly interrogated by Pontius Pilate, Dionysus (another dying-and-rising god) allegedly appeared before King Pentheus on charges of claiming divinity.[751]

Jesus' death and empty tomb story shares similarities with the mystery over the deceased Hercules' bones,[752] and also of Romulus, whose

disappearance was associated with an unusual darkness, and would eventually result in triumph.[753]

There is many a parallel to be had with Jesus being a dying and rising divine being, with one of the more interesting involving Zeus. In addition to the Massacre of Innocents theme, and the fact that sky-father Yahweh has much in common with sky-father Zeus, such as 'taking over' from their fathers, the Olympian has a fair bit in common with Jesus also, who is supposed to be Yahweh in the flesh.[754] Jesus died and returned. He was also exalted from a very lowly station (he was but a humble carpenter) to being a figure of supreme importance, which Paul and the Gospels agree on.[755] These themes, and more, are shared with the Greek god Zeus.

Whilst also having a humble birth, and needing to avoid a murderous tyrant early on in life, the youngest child of titans Rhea and Cronus, Zeus, was spared from the latter's infanticidal feast when a rock was given to Cronus instead. Since outrageously powerful gods are apparently exceedingly stupid, Cronus ate the rock, thinking it to be Zeus, and saw that it was good. A much buffer Zeus came back after a badly needed montage,[756] somehow managed to free the other gods from Kronos' belly,[757] with them coming out in reverse order, naturally. Interestingly, the first 'god/child' to come out was the rock, which represented Zeus. In one fell swoop, the lowly Zeus was 'resurrected' or 'reborn', and 'exalted' as the supremely important first-born of God, and would be triumphant, even becoming the king of kings.[758] Somewhat unlike Jesus, Zeus would go on to have a spectacular career as one of history's greatest assholes.[759]

And while many religious traditions incorporate some element of astro-theology via sun-worship, Church father Tertullian responds to the allegation that the sun is the god of Christianity not with denial, but with a surprising and perhaps immature admission/defence: "What then? Do you do less than this?"[760] There is yet more reason to think that Christianity had purely fictional origins, influenced by Pagan ideas. Robert Price noted similarities between the story of Jesus and the "Mythic Hero Archetype" delineated earlier by independent scholar FitzRoy Richard Somerset (the fourth Baron Raglan) and psychologist Otto Rank:[761]

> In broad outline and in detail, the life of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels corresponds to the worldwide Mythic Hero Archetype in which a divine hero's birth is supernaturally predicted and conceived, the infant hero escapes attempts to kill him, demonstrates his precocious wisdom already as a child, receives a divine commission, defeats demons, wins acclaim, is hailed as king, then betrayed, losing popular favor, executed, often on a hilltop, and is vindicated and taken up to heaven.[762]

The identification of such parallels is certainly not limited to mythicists, with Robert Funk recognising that Paul "identified Jesus as a savior figure of the Hellenistic type, a dying/rising god, such as Osiris in the Isis cult" and noticing that "It was not the life and teachings of Jesus but the death of Jesus and his appearance to Paul in a vision… that became the focal points of Paul's gospel".[763] Other scholars noting the similarities of Christianity and mystery religions include second century Christian Church Father Clement of Alexandria and Professor of Bible and Christian Studies Marvin W. Meyer.[764]

Hoffman also indicated that the knowledge of such parallels is "not new to scholarship" and that there are many similar myths and stories of earlier figures, who often were "dying, rising, saving".[765] In a recent article, Biblical scholar Philip Davies theorises that a recognition that Jesus' historicity is not certain would "nudge Jesus scholarship towards academic respectability", finds attempts at discovering the 'Historical Jesus' to be "poor history", and confirms the alleged mythic parallels:

> Two articles in *Is This Not the Carpenter?* (by the two editors, in fact) amass a great deal of evidence that the profile of Jesus in the New Testament is composed of stock motifs drawn from all over the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. These parallels are valid: in trying to provide an account of who and what Jesus was such resources were inevitably drawn upon, consciously or unconsciously by the gospel writers.[766]

Again, these parallels do not mean that Jesus did not exist, but it does raise questions as to the reliability and intent of the Gospels, and makes the Historical Jesus less necessary. And while Jesus mythicists would have obvious incentive to downplay the importance and reliability of the Gospels, criticism of the Gospels and uncertainty over their genre is not limited to them. Early critics such as Trypho (who also may not actually have existed…) and Celsus also criticised the fictions associated with Jesus.[767] Ehrman, a Jesus historicist, admits that "The Gospels do

portray Jesus in ways that are non-historical."[768] Nor is such criticism limited to non-believers. Early Christian theologian, Origen, who seemed to favour allegorical readings, explains that the Gospels have discrepancies and need to be understood 'spiritually':

> The spiritual truth was often preserved, as one might say, in the material falsehood... So much I have said of the apparent discrepancies in the Gospels, and of my desire to have them treated in the way of spiritual interpretation.[769]

Research by New Testament scholar Jerome Neyrey on the composition of John's Gospel reveals that it is structured in a way so as to be persuasive in portraying Jesus as a figure worthy of praise; a trend he also finds among the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.[770] This is not surprising, as all the canonical Gospels demonstrate their non-subtle evangelistic purpose in promoting a 'supernatural Jesus',[771] raising questions as to their status as sober and objective historical biographies, and to the Gospel authors' intentions. An indicator that the Gospels might indeed be biographical accounts comes from the beginning of Luke's Gospel, which is the only canonical Gospel with such an introduction. [772]

The anonymous author of Luke claims that "Many have undertaken to" narrate Jesus' story,[773] and to have "carefully investigated everything from the beginning", indicating that the author is not a contemporary – and thus not an eyewitness – but that he is practicing history. The latter point is problematic, given that Luke does not discuss his methods, name his sources, or show any scepticism with the various claims made about Jesus. Luke also fails to clarify his credentials, or even his identity. Furthermore, we do know that Luke made use of Mark's gospel and probably Matthew's (or to keep many historicists happy, the hypothetical Q source); sources that are full of fictions and sources that don't claim to be so 'historical'.

Appealing to the work of Josephus, theologian David Moessner argues that Luke 1:3 can be interpreted to mean that Luke is a contemporary of the events, leaving open the possibility that he is an eyewitness.[774] But this too is a problematic theory, given that Luke starts his tale before the birth of Jesus[775] and like an omniscient narrator, seems to be able to

describe what happens when Jesus is alone, and the disciples are asleep.[776] Another interpretation of the verse is provided by the literal meaning of *ἄνωθεν* (rendered in the New International Version as "from the beginning"), which is "from above". Given the subject matter, such as the supernatural claims of Luke's Gospel, it would be appropriate that this gospel's author is claiming that his knowledge of Jesus comes from his 'direct channel to the divine'. If, like Paul, Luke's source is revelation "from above", or "from Heaven" (cf. James 3:17), his credibility as a historian is highly questionable; as if it wasn't already, with the miraculous claims and all. And, of course, this divine revelation could be an allusion to Luke searching the Jewish scriptures for talk of Christ, as earlier Jews and Christians had already done.

Another explanation for Luke's prologue, and eventually for his gospel's unreliability and interdependence, comes from New Testament scholar Dennis MacDonald. Apart from the very first step, his theory brings some much-needed clarity and simplicity to the field. On MacDonald's view, each document builds on the previous ones, effectively going from his version of the hypothetical Q (aka Q+, or the *Logoi*), to Mark, to Matthew, to Church Father Papias' lost books,[777] to Luke (which is then a 2nd century document), and to John, meaning that apart from the genuine Pauline epistles, we really only have one independent source for the Historical Jesus: Q+.[778] And as we shall soon see, this is a major problem for Jesus' historicity, as even mainstream historicist scholars recognise that Paul doesn't discuss the Historical Jesus, and Q is unnecessary and probably unhelpful (MacDonald himself is otherwise famous for another theory, about Mark's gospel, that somewhat works against the idea that Mark needed to use a hypothetical Q or Q+ source).[779] And of course, this hypothesised Q+ could be a rough draft of Mark, whose extensive sidenotes reveal it to be an attempt at allegorising Paul's less detailed and very different story.

The hype around Luke's prologue notwithstanding, put simply, Luke does not discuss his methods, name his sources (which could well be 'supernatural'), or show any scepticism with the various claims made about Jesus. Luke also fails to clarify his credentials, or even his identity. Combined with his evangelical intent, his belief in the supernatural, and

his penchant for making stuff up, he clearly does not have the makings of an excellent historian, despite what apologists and some historicists surprisingly claim. Given that the Gospels are anonymous, scholars cannot be certain who wrote them, and why. The genre of the gospels is still up for debate, and perhaps always will be. Whether scholars call them 'midrash', allegorical fiction or something else, it seems plausible that the gospels could be something other than objective, historical biographies, written by reputable, reliable, and critical authors. We would do well to heed Schmidt's sober warnings:

> … *a Gospel is by nature not high literature, but low literature; not the product of an individual author, but a folk-book; not a biography, but a cult legend.* Faint hints to the contrary do not change the total picture in the slightest. Luke may well have possessed the skills of an author, but he could not and would not have produced a biography of Jesus. Even the Fourth Gospel – which is personal confession of a sort – has more tradition behind it than we could ever ascertain. Above and beyond its personal aspects, it is the product of a confessing community.[780]

Burridge's Take on the Gospels' Genre

"But," you might ask, "what about Burridge? Didn't he *prove* that the Gospels are ancient biographies, and that they can thus be trusted?" Before we analyse what the irascible Casey described as "the outstanding work of Richard Burridge", let us be reminded of the fact that the latter is a Christian – an Anglican priest, no less – and thus may not be as critical as we'd hope. Indeed, the following examples reveal just how biased and uncritical Burridge can be. On miracles and fulfilled Old Testament prophecies:

> Some people say we cannot be expected to believe this in our rational world; actually, such stories are very common in all forms of ancient literature, including their history books, as well as in other cultures. It really depends on our prior assumptions: if we rule such things out as impossible in advance, then they have no place in an historical account today. On the other hand, if we accept and believe in Jesus as the Son of God who was raised from the dead, then it should not be surprising that he could do extraordinary things. [781]

I shall translate into the common parlance. 'Some people' means 'competent historians', 'rule such things out as impossible' means

‘justifiably consider such things to be incredibly implausible’, and ‘if we accept and believe in Jesus…’ means ‘everything in the Bible is true’. This is extraordinary. You silly, silly atheists. If you would all just “accept and believe in Jesus as the Son of God who was raised from the dead, then it should not be surprising that he could do extraordinary things”. *Touché*… Is it any wonder that I try to limit the discussion to atheists? And on the resurrection of Jesus:

> Modern historical enquiry can be uncomfortable about claims of people rising from the dead, and yet history has to provide some explanation of the change in the disciples, and why the Jesus movement did not die out like the others. If the authorities had the body of Jesus in safekeeping, it would have been easy to produce it to stop the early church in its tracks. However one assesses the historical arguments for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it remains a fact that this is the constant thread throughout the rest of the New Testament, and in the experience of Christians for the next two thousand years, without which there would be no history of Christianity – and no need for this book![782]

Again, this supposed expert clearly does not have the ability to think very critically about such important issues as the genre of the Gospels. Now that I have, in the tradition of great historicists like Ehrman and Casey, unnecessarily poisoned the well, we shall touch on something more relevant: Burridge’s argument. This seeming titan of objective scholarship produced a wildly popular book, *What Are the Gospels?*, which essentially argues that the Gospels are examples of ancient Graeco-Roman biography (*Bioi*), and that we should examine them as such. Apart from the fact that biographies were also written of fictional characters, so that this ‘discovery’ is of relatively little import to our current investigation, and the truism that whatever they are, the Gospels are filled with non-truths, Burridge’s work is highly problematic.[783]

Let us charitably overlook the oddity that ‘*bios*’ means ‘life’; Mark actually skips over most of Jesus’ life, preferring to focus on his important mission. Firstly, Burridge effectively admits the evangelical aims of his project, when he agrees that the “biographical interest of the early church in the person of Jesus should act as a spur to contemporary evangelism and preaching, which also need to be based on the life and character of Jesus”, and further ends his conclusion to the bulk of his case with a Biblical verse that admits to the evangelical nature of the Gospels (John 20:30-31).[784] Another problem is that his ‘definition’ of *bioi* or Greco-Roman biography

is questionable, with quite different examples taken from what is almost a thousand-year period. Furthermore, he relies on only ten examples,[785] though there were many thousands of books written during this period.[786] He even admits that (his take on) "the genre is very flexible" when apparently trying to force a square peg into a round hole.[787] Of course, the more broad or 'flexible' is the definition, the less useful it is, and the less confidence we can have in Burridge's conclusions.

He further says that "A mixture of literary units make up *Bioi*", which suggests to me that his definition is merely idiosyncratic and self-serving.[788] One of the biggest problems, common in evangelistic work, is that Burridge stresses some similarities between his sample texts and the Gospels, while ignoring the major differences. For example, unlike for many/most/all of the sample texts, the Gospels' authors are anonymous, and make little to no mention of Jesus' early life, and other biographical details. The intended audiences, too, may have been different. Furthermore, one need only look at one of his examples, Philostratus' *Apollonius*, to see that 'Greco-Roman biographies' should discuss the sources used, which is very unlike what we find in the Gospels. Indeed, while Burridge's classification of the Gospels as Greco-Roman biographies is dubious, we could easily see them (or at least originating) as Greek tragedies/dramatic novels, what with the formulaic structure, irony, and clear themes. In fact, several scholars, such as Gilbert Bilezikian and Dennis MacDonald, have effectively argued this.[789] In a later book on another topic, MacDonald also provided a handy summary of Jesus' similarities with classical Greek heroes:

> By imitating classical Greek poetry, Mark transformed his protagonist into a rival of Greek heroes and gods. Like Hermes, he walks on water; like Aeolus, he commands the winds; like Odysseus, he outwits his opponents and exemplifies an enormous capacity for suffering; like Achilles, he pursues his goals fully aware that doing so will bring on his early death; like Hector, he dies abandoned by his god, and his corpse must be fetched from his killer. Marks Jesus not only imitated Greek mythological characters; he emulated or rivaled them. Whereas Hector's body stayed in his tomb, Jesus' rose after three days. The Gospel was good news because it presented Jesus as surpassing all rivals, including Hellenic heroes.[790]

Bart Ehrman, though he meant well, offered no support to the idea that the Gospels are reliable biographies:

> As we will see, for example, the New Testament Gospels put an inordinate amount of emphasis on the death of the main character, something highly unusual for ancient biography. The stress on Jesus' death, however, is determined by the distinctive emphasis of these works and is not out of bounds for the genre. Instead, it shows that the Gospels are a kind of sub-subgenre, or one type of ancient religious biography. Moreover, the Gospels differ in some ways not only from other Greco-Roman biographies, but also from each other.[791]

Ehrman acknowledges the differences, and then sadly attempts to fit a square peg into a round hole himself. A radically different text can always, in this way, be considered a "sub-subgenre". And "differ in some ways" understates things a little. Authorial identity and the naming of sources are no small matters! But more important is whether the information therein can be trusted. After all, even one of Burridge's ten examples – Philo's *Moses* – is written about a fictional character.[792] Incredibly, if *Moses* was his only example (*Apollonius* is also questionable), Burridge's work would effectively argue that the genre of the Gospels indicates that Jesus didn't exist either! And if Avalos' and Law's thoughts are anything to go by, the obvious fabrications in the Gospels should attract doubt even on the more mundane claims. Recall that many ancient historians, including the influential Polybius, seemed to think so:

> … as the proverb tells us that a single drop from the largest vessel suffices to tell us the nature of the whole contents, so we should regard the subject now under discussion. When we find one or two false statements in a book and they prove to be deliberate ones, it is evident that not a word written by such an author is any longer certain and reliable.[793]

And again, ironically, Jesus himself, if he existed, seemed to favour such an approach:

> "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.[794]

It is also not insignificant that even conservative Christian scholars can acknowledge that identifying the Gospels as *bioi* does not single-

handedly address all our concerns:

> Because *bios* was a flexible genre, it is often difficult to determine where history ends and legend begins.[795]

We might also play around with the notion that if the link between the Gospels and ancient Greco-Roman biographies is so obvious, why nobody seemed to realise it until nearly two thousand years later, through the work of a scholar who happens to be a devout and evangelising Christian. Now while Burridge hasn't convinced me, there are many other specialist scholars who disagree with his conclusions. One high-profile critic of Burridge's work was Joseph H. Lynch.[796] There is also Michael E. Vines, who sees Mark as a Jewish novel.[797] Professor of Theology Pheme Perkins finds much in common between the Gospels and Philo's *Life of Moses* (which, of course, is based on a fictional Jewish character), states that "Greco-Roman biographies were addressed to a social and literary elite, which may explain why the Gospels, addressed to a much broader audience, do not match them very closely", and notes that "Neither the evangelists nor their first readers engaged in historical analysis. Their aim was to confirm Christian faith".[798]

Nevertheless, if it is granted that the Gospels are ancient biographies, they're still full of lies (or 'non-truths', if you prefer). We shouldn't necessarily expect these bad trees to yield good fruit, as even the subject of our investigation warned. There still seems to be considerable doubt regarding the genre, intent, accuracy, and thus, the reliability of these texts.[799] That the Gospels may not be completely trustworthy sources of history certainly does not rule out the possibility of Jesus' historical existence; but they certainly give ample reason to question it.

Mark's Failure

The crucial role Mark's gospel plays in establishing Jesus' historicity was stressed earlier. Texts preceding the gospel of Mark may be referring to a non-literal Jesus (discussed shortly), while texts appearing later could very well be "tainted" by Mark, as Carrier explains:

> The only overt evidence of his existence can be tied in one way or another to a single source: the Gospel of Mark, which could have been written as late as 80 or 90 A.D., fifty

> years after the events it is supposed to describe, and which is unmistakably a hagiography rather than a history or biography, whose interest seems more cultural than factual… All additional evidence, though still adding weight to any case for historicity, is either too vague to be conclusive, or tainted by association with this document.[800]

For a document on which so much relies, the gospel of Mark has many characteristics that could diminish the trust scholars place in it as a reliable source for Jesus' life story. The author of Mark is unknown, and it was written around four decades or more after the death of Jesus.[801] No original copy of Mark is extant; the oldest manuscript which contains some sections of Mark's Gospel, *Papyrus 45*, dates to the third century. Possible 'historical' source material for Mark is also unknown. If any primary sources were consulted, scholars cannot know how accurately such material was reported, nor can they determine how much of the Gospel stemmed from such sources. For example, Kelber acknowledged that Mark's passion narrative, obviously key to the text, was woven out of whole cloth by Mark.[802] If this crucial element would be completely fabricated by the author of the Gospel, why not everything else? Mark's credibility is also questionable, partly due to appeals to the supernatural and likely evangelical intention.[803]

The very first verse of Mark's gospel labels the work as the "good news" (*euangélion*) rather than as an accurate and objective historical account.[804] Mark includes anecdotes about Jesus that can't possibly be accurate, such as when Jesus curses a fig tree (cruelly ruining a valuable food source for starving people – probably), because it had no figs, when Mark specifically noted that it wasn't the season for figs![805] Surely the exalted magic man would not be that stupid, or mean. The gospel of Mark captures only the last portion of Jesus' life, from his baptism[806] to his death. Key narratives such as his allegedly miraculous birth,[807] or even anything to do with Jesus' early life, and triumphant resurrection[808] are not included. There are more reasons to doubt Mark's reliability, such as the tampering evident with the addition of Mark16:9-20.[809] Mark's gospel ends with a potential message of hope,[810] rather than an explicit description of Jesus' resurrection, which could indicate that the story was not intended to be taken literally. This might also echo Paul's writings, where, inexplicably, Jesus' post-resurrection appearances seem to be of relatively little importance.

It is as if no Christian was concerned with this – for several decades – until Matthew came along with his elaborated tale. Perhaps Jesus' divine revelations were more important, or even the only 'genuine' communications. Keeping to the last chapter of Mark, chapter 16, it is often speculated that women finding the empty tomb would be likely historically accurate, begrudgingly included by Mark as it would supposedly be embarrassing to this Jewish man that women were given this honor.[811] Maybe. Or maybe this allegorically illustrates Jesus' earlier parable, in Mark, of the rich young man, which has Jesus concluding that "many who are first will be last, and the last first".[812]

Interestingly, in the verses immediately after the parable, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, providing a handy link. In Mark 15, the great and powerful Jesus is humbled in the worst possible way. In Mark 16, the humiliated and dead Jesus has apparently triumphantly risen, and been exalted, while it is 'mere' women who have the privilege of knowing this first. I find this all too 'neat' to be simple coincidence. (Also note that Mark's very last verse claims that the women "said nothing to anyone", which again raises questions as to how Mark knows all this and how the faith spread beyond the two women!)[813]

Like the author, the genre of Mark is unknown, though it does contain fabrications and myth.[814] Mark is also the shortest of the canonical Gospels, which is consistent with the common mythicist belief that the Jesus story had evolved over time, which is something historicists posit also.[815] As demonstrated by Price, and many Jesus historicists before him, so much of the gospel of Mark shares parallels with the Old Testament's account of Israel's history. Events in Jesus' life have parallels with events in the lives of Old Testament figures such as Adam, Moses, Elijah and David, to say nothing of the similarities between Mark's content and the prophetic warnings from the Old Testament.[816]

And it is not just Jesus mythicists who identify Old Testament parallels and are further critical of Mark's gospel. Joel Marcus recognised the heavy influence of the Old Testament on Mark,[817] while twentieth-century theologian William Wrede, described Mark's gospel as theological

fiction and noted that if so much of the material is unhistorical, then having doubts on what remains is "extremely natural".[818] Jesus historicist Burton Mack boldly proclaims Mark's "obvious fiction":

> As for the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, Mark took the basic ideas from the Christ myth but dared to imagine how the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ might have looked if played out as a historical event in Jerusalem, something the Christ myth resisted. Thus Mark's story is best understood as a studied combination of Jesus traditions with the Christ myth. The combination enhanced Jesus' importance as a historical figure by casting him as the son of God or the Christ and by working out an elaborate plot to link his fate to the history of Mark's community. We may therefore call Mark's gospel a myth of origin for the Markan community. It was imagined in order to understand how history could have gone the way it had and the Jesus movement still be right about its loyalties and views… We do not usually think of mythmaking as the achievement of a moment or the work of a single writer no matter how brilliant. But in Mark's case we have an obvious fiction, masterly composed by someone who had to be doing his work at a desk as any author would. It was Mark's fiction that soon became the accepted story of the way to imagine Jesus appearing in the world.[819]

The timing of the appearance of Mark's gospel (and indeed the later Gospels) is noteworthy as being a time of great upheaval for the Jews. It is not known who Mark was, but the timing of his gospel's creation could provide a clue as to his intentions. Perhaps it is mere coincidence that the Gospel of Mark is created around the time of the First Jewish-Roman War and the destruction of Jerusalem,[820] when many Jews (like Paul and his supporters)[821] may have wished for a Jewish saviour to defeat their enemies, including those Romans and 'treacherous' Jews who controlled the Temple. Or perhaps this is when Paul's "visionary Christ" (theorised by mythicists and historicists alike)[822] finally appears in the flesh in Judaea, leaving with a message of hope by the end of Mark's gospel.[823]

Scholars may wonder if Mark's hint that Jesus could render the Temple superfluous[824] coincidentally coincides with the destruction of the temple by the Romans; perhaps paving the way for a 'new temple' (and 'new religion') for disillusioned Jews, much as the compiling (and study) of the Torah during the Babylonian exile may have partly been a reaction to the destruction of the First Temple.[825] In other words, Jesus handily gives such Jews a spiritual victory; a spiritual solution to a very real, physical problem.[826] All people need do is believe in the Christ figure that was possibly 'revealed' by Paul. It is obvious that those Jews that

became Christians had the spiritual solution to the physical problem of the Temple's destruction. With Jesus' sacrifice, the Temple was simply no longer required.[827] Just as obviously, other (i.e. Rabbinical) Jews required and developed spiritual solutions to this problem as well.[828]

Perhaps less obviously, but most importantly, many pre-Christian Jews would also have appreciated a spiritual solution to the physical problem; the problem not being the Temple's destruction, but the inaccessibility caused by its being controlled by the Roman-loving Temple cult. One noteworthy example would be the more 'progressive' Pharisees, what with their synagogues and Oral Torah, who had less need for the Temple; likewise the Essenes who thought the Temple leadership so corrupt that they developed and performed their own religious rituals elsewhere.[829] So while the Markan audience's need for a spiritual solution may be greater and more urgent, as the Temple had just been destroyed in the war, spiritual solutions were still required by Jews (perhaps like Paul and co.) *beforehand*, with the situation in Judea quite dire and likely to worsen. [830]

This idea of the spiritual solution to the physical problem works on both minimal historicity and minimal mythicism. The challenge is to figure out who came up with the idea of a Temple-replacing Christ, which was one of many possible solutions, and when. Is it really likely that this idea originated with the followers of a historical, but very insignificant dime-a-dozen preacher? Or is it more reasonable that it originated with pre-Christian and possibly apocalyptic Jews who already believed in a Celestial Messiah? If the latter seems more plausible, and it clearly does to us, did this happen before or after the Temple's destruction?

That certain Jews (i.e. Mark) may have created a historicised Christ in response to the Temple's destruction could be seen as problematic to minimal mythicism. Where does that leave Paul, who we already think believed in the messianic problem-solver, a purely celestial one, *before* the destruction of the Temple? The answer, as already implied above, is that the earlier (i.e. pre-Markan) Jews like Paul, Peter, and so forth, may have created Jesus Christ (even as a mere revelatory figure in Heaven) in response to the Temple being controlled by the hated and Roman-friendly

Temple cult. In both cases, it is easy to see how a ‘spiritual solution’ to a physical problem would be deemed necessary. Of course, claims grounded in what are obviously spiritual solutions, should not impress us critical atheists.

Another happy coincidence is that the messianic prophecy of Daniel 9 just happens to coincide with Jesus’ lifetime, when employing the Preterist method of calculation favored by the Catholics. When dealing with Jesus’ apparently fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, Christians typically see no problem, assuming them to be genuine. Atheists, of course, generally think that fabrication has taken place, so that, in reality, prophecies were not fulfilled at all, but made to look like they were – and it would truly be astounding if the authors’ creative licence stopped there. Yet the prophecies of Daniel 9, Jesus’ life, and the destruction of Jerusalem present a problem for some atheists. Those atheists who are mythicists or agnostics would be happy to be consistent and suppose that Mark’s placing Jesus in history around 0-30 CE (note that the earlier Paul did not place Jesus in history, or a specific location) was partly to fulfil this prophecy – and even this may have been intended as allegory. Those atheists who are historicists need to be inconsistent and somehow find that this convenient turn of events was not because of fabrication, despite the fact that so much of the Jesus story is obviously fabricated, but that it was pure coincidence.

It would seem obvious now that the gospel of Mark should not necessarily be understood in a literal sense. Perhaps ‘he’ intended to symbolically explain that the Jews were being punished, but still had a way to curry God’s favour.[831] And perhaps Mark’s readers were all too happy to misunderstand Mark’s intentions, and came to see the story as literally true. If Mark cannot necessarily be dismissed as being a reliable record of actual events, it can surely be questioned. Mark is the key to understanding the historical Jesus; so historians would reasonably hope for Mark to be objective, accurate, and lacking in miraculous claims. In that regards, Mark has failed.

The gospel of Mark itself however, is not necessarily a ‘failure’. It may be that Biblical scholars (and religious believers) are the ones who

have failed, having misunderstood the real intent and meaning of Mark's gospel. Mark may only be a failure if it is expected to be a reliable and objective piece of historical writing. But perhaps that was never the author's intent. The Gospels' very first parable (Mark 4:1-20) has Jesus explaining that (Mark 4:10-12) there are two levels of truth (one for the elite, one for the masses, akin to the symbolism and allegory of mystery religions,[832] and the potential therefore for multiple interpretations), and that this parable is crucial to understanding all his parables (Mark 4:13).

I wonder if this passage, which has Jesus secretly revealing important matters to his inner circle, with outsiders only being told of parables, sneakily symbolises both the trend we see in the Epistles (that the Jesus in heaven reveals his teachings only to select apostles, who then teach others), and the fact that this very book is a parable, since it is we outsiders who are reading it. Without such 'alternative' theorising, it seems very difficult to explain why a more mainstream Jesus would want anybody to be secretive about the path to salvation! There are many verses about this secrecy and elitism, such as in Matthew 7:6, where Jesus cruelly orders believers to avoid giving "that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine".[833] This secrecy is expected for a *mystery cult*, whilst it is totally unexpected on the mainstream hypotheses.

Back to the seemingly crucial parable, it is significant that the version of it in the (possibly older) *Gospel of Thomas* is more concise and lacks the explanation; perhaps this gospel, generally devoid of narrative, needed no explanation of the symbolic nature of its teachings. Interestingly, the narrative around the parable in Mark's version has Jesus sitting in a boat on a lake, preaching to the multitudes on the shore. The narrative may itself be filled with symbolic imagery, such as that Jesus is separated from the masses (just as in truths) by water (which may need traversing). It would be highly appropriate then if the entire gospel of Mark was intended as a meta-parable; that none of it was intended to be taken literally.

In other words, Jesus' parables are literary inventions designed to convey certain teachings, but the very 'account' of Jesus delivering those parables may also be a literary invention, designed to convey and

accentuate these and other teachings. I think this quite likely, since secrecy is apparently cherished, yet Mark is seemingly just 'giving it away'. Where is the secret if Mark is so casually giving us 'the key'? Now Mark certainly would not have been the first to layer fictions upon fictions, in an attempt to convey some profound messages. As evidenced by the book of Job, we already know that Jewish authors were quite capable of wrapping a (fictional) frame story around (fictional) embedded narratives.[834] In fact, as alluded to earlier, numerous mainstream scholars – including Christian scholars – have perceived Mark as an allegorisation of the writings and even life of Paul.

One such proponent is Tom Dykstra, a historicist, who seems to be building somewhat on the work of Christian theologian Gustav Volkmar (who considered Mark's Jesus to be a literary character, heavily influenced by Paul's writings, and supposed this back in the 1800's!), and who also urges caution regarding hypothetical oral sources.[835] Further supporting this possibility of a purely fictional Mark, Dykstra also thinks that there are hints in the Gospels, such as anachronisms, that suggest that the authors simply invented unique material, rather than copying from hypothetical sources.[836]

It seems that we have another – somewhat unexpected – proponent in Christian theologian Jesper Svartvik, who admits that "*Mark is perhaps best described as a narrative presentation of, and a parallel to, the Pauline Gospel.*"[837] As a testament to its increasing acceptability, several mainstream scholars discuss for and against this view in the recent book, *Mark and Paul: For and Against Pauline Influence on Mark*.[838] Of particular note is the chapter by theologian and New Testament scholar Heike Omerzu, which discusses how silly it would be to think that the differences in genre would preclude dependence.

Briefly playing devil's advocate, going against the view of Pauline influence on Mark, it may be a little problematic to explain why Mark doesn't discuss the Apostle Paul, if he respects him so much. But perhaps this acknowledges, as Paul himself does, that Paul was not one of the very first Christians. It is certainly noteworthy, that Mark doesn't portray Peter, seemingly one of Paul's rivals, or indeed any of the 'first Christians' in his

tale, very flatteringly (which seems to contradict the traditional view that Mark is Peter's secretary). Mark probably feels, as Paul does, that Paul is the greatest apostle despite not being one of the first. This seemingly heightens the importance of Mark 10:31, which has Jesus saying that many who are last will be first. Some agreement is to be found from the late biblical scholar Michael Goulder, who thought that Mark was trying to legitimise Paul's views, and noted how "the Marcan Jesus speaks with the voice of Paul".[839]

Again proving that the view is not exactly fringe, New Testament scholar Joel Marcus recognises that "the tide appears to be shifting, and several scholars have recently contended that Mark should be situated in the Pauline sphere of activity", whilst himself listing numerous similarities between Paul's Epistles and Mark's Gospel.[840] There are many more scholars who believe that the Gospels derive from Paul's writings, such as David Oliver Smith, who also wonders if the hypothetical *Q* source really has its origins in Paul.[841] Interestingly, Jewish Bible expert Jon Levenson implies that Mark is borrowing off of the Old Testament directly and indirectly, *through Paul*, concerning the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen.[842] Levenson also happens to say that we ought to read the New Testament as midrashic exegesis:

> Their [the Christian] effort to dispossess the community of the Torah bears eloquent and enduring witness to the indispensability of the Torah to the early Church and to the thoroughly intertextual, indeed midrashic character of the most basic elements of the Christian message – a point with which most Christians, even most New Testament scholars, have failed to reckon.[843]

Though it is generally not seen as reasonable to question Jesus' historicity, remarkably, it is seen as reasonable to question the all-important first Gospel's authorial intent and method, and thus, its historical accuracy. Clearly, if Mark merely and primarily allegorised Paul's writings, the traditional theories about the Historical Jesus – which borrow heavily from the Gospels rather than Paul's letters – are in quite a bit of trouble. Now all this makes me wonder if there is a 'Historical Jesus' after all: Paul! Particularly interesting is the thesis of New Testament scholar Bartosz Adamczewski, who is sceptical over claims made about oral traditions, and sees Mark's Jesus as deriving from Paul's

writings, Paul's life, the Septuagint,[844] Josephus' writings, and various Pagan (and fictional) texts, to the extent that "Mark should therefore be regarded as a strictly theological-ethopoeic work, rather than a biographic one".[845]

In other words, by allegorising, Mark is creating 'Gospel Jesus'. And since Paul also allegorises the Old Testament, which is basically fictional, it seems that Mark's account of Jesus, which forms the basis for later accounts of Jesus, is constructed from allegories of allegories of fictions.[846] It really does now seem plausible to think not only that the 'mythical portions' of the Gospels are 'embellishments', but that the 'historical portions' are as well. Given the similarities between Mark and Paul's writings, scholars are increasingly supposing that the former is an allegorisation of the latter (and other extant sources so that the magical imaginary sources need not be invoked), so that it seems increasingly plausible to posit that the Gospel story post-dates and not pre-dates Paul's theology.

We can wonder if Paul is actually borrowing from Mark, but that makes no sense given that Mark is writing later, and Paul never explicitly refers to Mark's Jesus; this could only work if we appealed to Ehrman's mysterious, imaginary sources, which no competent scholar should ever do. What is still debated among mainstream biblical scholars is exceedingly obvious to those not willing to look upon the *earlier* writings of Paul with Gospel-tinged glasses.[847] This observation goes some way to explaining why Paul apparently 'quotes' Jesus without giving due credit, why Paul seems unaware of Jesus' amazing life here on Earth, and why Mark's supposedly numerous and historically accurate foundational sources are unknown.

Paul even alludes to the old stories about Moses' people serving as (fictional) examples to contemporary Jews, so that the creation of new (and fictional) examples – especially with the Temple being destroyed – by people like Mark seems reasonable.[848] Of course, if this increasingly mainstream theory is true, the case for the Historical Jesus is over before it begins, especially when we acknowledge the fact that certain pre-Christian Jews already believed in a celestial messiah. This meta-parable

idea further harmonises with scholars who discuss the midrashic-type tendencies of the canonical Gospels and the possibility that proper names in the Gospels are puns reflecting their purpose in the story, such as the Jewish Nicodemus, whose name could indicate a ‘leader’ or ‘ruler’, being described in John 3:1 as a “ruler of the Jews”.[849] Interestingly, though used earlier, Jesus’ name, meaning “Yahweh is salvation”, also seems highly appropriate to his greater identity and role in the larger story.[850]

Consider that essentially every element in Mark can be, by scholars, dismissed as supernatural elaboration (as all secular scholars will agree), claimed as otherwise implausible or at least uncorroborated authorial inventions (as many competent historians already do),[851] identified as borrowing from Greek literature (such as with MacDonald), identified as borrowing from Philo (controversial and disputed, but hard to ignore), [852] thought to be Jewish midrash on the Old Testament (as claimed by Price and the Millers),[853] reimagined from Paul (our earliest Christian source, as increasing numbers of scholars are conceding), mere parable (obvious), or perceived as allegory (as with Helms and many others). So what is left? Nothing. Nothing substantial, anyway. Perhaps a little filler, from the mind of Mark, to weave all this together into a coherent narrative. Numerous scholars are already comfortable with this ‘fictional embellishing’ notion.[854]

Whatever key residual *might* be left over must then be judged by other sources. Do we have objective and contemporary sources to validate such Markan claims? Unless we appeal to Ehrman and Casey’s convenient, *deus ex machina*, imaginary sources, the answer is a resounding ‘no’. Should we prefer the approach of the Ehrmans and Caseys of the world, who invoke Ehrman’s law? Who derive uncompromising and intransigent conclusions from sources that *do not exist*? Or should we trust the seemingly more rational and respectable approach of other scholars, most of them who are not mythicists or anti-Christian, who appeal to foundational sources for the Gospels that actually *do exist*? Add to this that Mark doesn’t identify himself, doesn’t claim to be writing history, and doesn’t mention his qualifications or sources, and you can begin to appreciate how profound it is that Mark is our very first Gospel.

Recall also that the later Gospels rely so heavily on the obviously problematic Mark, as if they lacked other, more reliable, sources, or even their own observations…[855] Even though there apparently were so many. It is astonishing that the later Gospels would prefer to copy Mark, which is so obviously non-historical,[856] rather than the apparent multitudes of reliable historical sources that they had access to. There is still ongoing debate as to the intended genre of the gospel of Mark, and of the other canonical Gospels (and also of the other New Testament texts). We simply have no good reason to believe that even the less obviously fictional material in the Gospels is veridical, and much reason to suspect that they simply elaborate on Paul's writings. Thus, there are numerous reasons to doubt the historical reliability of these anonymous writings. That leaves us only with Paul's writings to consider. And to anyone even a little familiar with what is in, and what is not in, Paul's epistles, this means that the case for the Historical Jesus' existence rests upon a knife-edge.

We should already admit agnosticism. On the mythicist view, Paul is completely unaware of an Earthly Jesus. On the historicist view, Paul hardly mentions him, and was not a part of his entourage. As perfectly summarised by mainstream historicist scholar Jason Staples:

> Schweitzer's notion of the disconnect between Jesus and Paul is really hard to sustain historically because of the drastic impact Paul had on the composition of the gospels [at least, if Joel Marcus is correct about Mark, which I think he is]—there is no access to Jesus outside of Paul's influence. One of the great ironies of early Christian history is that only through Paul is the historical Jesus accessible.[857]

Paul: The Untold Story

Paul graces us with the earliest Christian sources, with 1 Thessalonians usually dated to 49 CE, and his later works appearing around the early 60's CE.[858] Nevertheless, like the others writers, Paul is not an eyewitness, so none of his letters are primary sources. He also gives us plenty of reasons to doubt his claims, so that we really can't be sure if we should trust what he has to say about the Historical Jesus. But, of course, Paul has virtually nothing to say about the Historical Jesus anyway. Furthermore, what he does say about Jesus could be the key to unlocking the mysteries of Christianity's origins. There are hints throughout Paul's writings, and other epistles like the pseudo-Pauline book of Hebrews,[859] that the earliest Christians believed not in an Earthly Jesus, but in a purely Celestial Jesus. But first, let's take a look at how early Christians had vastly different views about Jesus.

The Docetic Jesus

It already seems obvious that the state of the sources gives us sufficient reason to doubt Jesus' historical existence. But certain interpretations of Paul's writings indicate that a more aggressive case against Jesus' history can be advanced. It is interesting to speculate on the possibility that early Christians (such as Paul) did not see Jesus in the literal, fleshly, Earth-visiting way that modern, orthodox Christians do. Without conclusive evidence, it remains an interesting theory. Recent studies in the origins of early Christianity however, are revealing that the very early days of the Christian faith were plagued with schism; there were many and varied types of Christianity,[860] with radically divergent views on doctrine, and even on the very nature of Jesus.[861]

One ancient group that had very different ideas of Jesus, which could open the door for even more 'non-historical' views, was the Docetists.[862] Much like Gnosticism, Docetism is a term that can be used for more groups and ideas than is intended. Of interest to this project are the

Docetists who essentially denied the reality of Jesus Christ's suffering (and his ultimate sacrifice), and thus became labelled as heretical by proto-orthodox Christians (the precursors to the Roman Catholics).[863] To these Docetists, Jesus Christ was not human; he was a spirit, completely divine.[864] This Jesus then only appeared to be human, much like a phantom. Such alternative Christianities were criticised by Irenaeus, who even knew of Christians that "allege that the Word and Christ never came into this world".[865] Bart Ehrman notes that there are instances in the New Testament where a docetic-type of Jesus may be hinted at,[866] particularly among the writings of Paul:

> For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.[867]

The passage may indicate that Jesus came not in "sinful flesh", but only in the "likeness of sinful flesh". The later First John also seems to counter those that do not believe in a literal, fleshly Jesus.[868] A Jesus that is 'not fleshly' is a Jesus closer to being entirely fictional, and renders theories about a Jesus that is 'not Earthly' more plausible. Could there have been a development away from an earlier belief in a purely Celestial Jesus to the more historicised and earthly Gospel Jesus? And of course, stories about supernatural entities appearing among us, as apparently lesser beings, are not exactly unique to the Christian faith. We have an abundance of fanciful tales about Greek gods like Zeus appearing on Earth as humans, and likewise with angels in the Old Testament. We dismiss them as wholly fictional. If Christianity started in this manner, should we not be just as dismissive?

Traces of Docetism found in the New Testament could indicate that Docetism and Christian Gnosticism may be older than traditionally thought; and contrary to popular views, potentially older than the more orthodox forms of Christianity. Ehrman goes on to mention that important early Christians like Origen and Clement of Alexandria also demonstrated hints of Gnostic and docetic thought.[869] Indeed, Clement, an influential theologian of the first century, even went so far as to say that, "the Gnostic alone is holy and pious".[870] Historian of religion Elaine Pagels

acknowledged early unorthodox views of Jesus, alluding to groups where "each person recognizes the Lord in his own way".[871] Ehrman also claimed that proto-orthodox Christian "scribes 'corrupted' their texts for theological reasons", and that they tampered with Galatians 4:4 in order to combat Docetism.[872] This particular verse is very significant to the debate over Jesus' historicity, as it is a rare passage among Paul's writings indicating that Jesus may have had a fleshly body, though it can just as easily be understood allegorically:

> But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "*Abba*, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.[873]

It seems odd that Paul would need to stress this if he meant it literally. It would be like a famous person's biography highlighting the obvious and benign facts that they have lived thanks to their father sharing his semen, that they are using their hands to write their memoirs, and that they are currently breathing in oxygen. It could plausibly be the work of an anti-Docetic Christian interpolator wanting to make it seem painfully obvious that Jesus was born, in the flesh, on Earth. While the passage is obviously theological and allegorical, even if genuine and literal, a Celestial Jesus can surely be born, especially if he can die. Also, Paul actually uses the word '*genomenon*',[874] derived from the relatively broad '*ginomai*' (rather than the narrower '*gennao*', as used to describe Jesus' birth in the Gospels), which can mean 'made', just as he uses it elsewhere, such as when referring to (the fictional) Adam, who was clearly not thought to have been born, but made by God, and to the resurrected saints.[875] If genuine, it seems evident that Paul was not thinking of a literal birth, on Earth.

Now, that early Christians could consider the possibility that Jesus had not literally come to Earth as a human being is remarkable in itself (given that they lived during or soon after Jesus' alleged time on Earth, and should have had access to still-living eyewitnesses), but also allows for the possibility of even more sceptical and heretical views; such as that Jesus only appeared in a Platonic realm, that he resides inside all people, or that

Jesus did not actually appear anywhere, in any form. I personally find it unthinkable that there could be such radically different views of Jesus, so soon after his literal and Earthly death.

But this diversity makes complete sense if Jesus was wholly fictional. Each community can truly create the Jesus they desire. Perhaps that's exactly what Paul and his predecessors had done. Given that the later gospel writers do just that, I see no reason to think that Paul, James, Peter, Clement, and other earlier Christian authors, could not have done likewise. Also, just as with figures such as Paul and Clement, the author of the noncanonical *Epistle of Barnabas*, 'Barnabas', seems to know about Jesus primarily through the Jewish scriptures. With this document portraying more of a historicised Jesus, though less than that presented in the canonical Gospels, perhaps it, or parts of it, serves as an evolutionary step between the writings of Paul and Mark.

I have as yet heard no convincing reason for supposing that Paul and other early Christian authors happen to believe in the same sort of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels,[876] particularly when we know (from biblical and extrabiblical sources) that there was already a diversity of views about Jesus, very early on in the movement. The assumption that Paul believes in the Gospel Jesus is completely unfounded[877] and has no place in critical scholarship – it is an assumption more suited to unsuspecting and unsophisticated believers. Ridding ourselves of this baseless assumption allows us to finally address this critical question, objectively: What sort of Jesus does Paul actually believe in?[878]

Consider also that if the argument can be made that the Gospel story of Jesus is meant to be taken as completely allegorical or symbolic, the same can also certainly be said about the Docetic Jesus, and the 'visionary Christ' of Paul's writings. If in the earliest Christian writings, Jesus is portrayed as a figure who resided not on Earth, but in another realm, or who may be entirely spiritual, and who communicates with his followers via visions and spiritual appearances, scholars could view such a Jesus with the scepticism they accord to 'spiritual' Gospel characters, such as Gabriel and Satan. Now before we try and figure out what sort of Jesus

Paul actually believes in, let's take a look at how Paul knows what he knows.

The Earliest Witness' Sources

It is rather unfortunate that our earliest Christian writer was not himself an eyewitness to the life of the Historical Jesus.[879] His letters are not contemporaneous with Jesus' life and it is interesting then to consider what it is that Paul says about Jesus, without reading the Gospels (which were composed later) into Paul's writings. Religious Studies scholar William Arnal also calls for such an approach to be used, noting that the canonical Gospels and Acts (an even later document) have affected how early Christians and Biblical scholars view the Pauline Epistles, and Paul himself, arguing that Paul could be understood to be a somewhat independent evangelising Jew, rather than a "Christian".[880] It is very important to know what Paul's sources are. Thankfully, he tells us:

> Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. [881]

> I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.[882]

> But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.[883]

> For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread;[884]

> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures…[885]

Paul even stresses that he avoided consulting with humans, and spent three years learning everything from God, and further assures readers that

he isn't lying.[886] Not only does Paul never mention his possible reliable, first-hand accounts, his only named sources are the Old Testament (and likely some intertestamental)[887] Scriptures, and his 'direct channel to the divine'. In 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Paul adds his mystical and educative journey to "the third heaven", to his standard "visions and revelations from the Lord". His sources are fictional, and *possibly* indicative of Paul's having been schizotypal or otherwise mentally unstable.

Paul does not know of the few events of Jesus' life he mentions as a result of having witnessed them. It could even be concluded that he did not come to know of these events by learning from those who were closest to a Historical Jesus (such as his apostles or relatives), because Paul never says so, and he clearly mentions his sources as being scripture and revelations, whilst unambiguously[888] dismissing human sources. That Paul, supposedly being converted and writing so soon after Jesus' death, gets all his information of Jesus from the Old Testament and his direct link to his god (rather than from eyewitnesses) is surprising, and makes the idea of an early belief in a purely Celestial Jesus more plausible. It certainly rules him out as a reliable historical source. From a naturalistic perspective, it would seem more probable that Paul is either lying, confusing dream events for real events, or suffers from hallucinations and/or some sort of mental illness.[889]

When it comes to key Christian doctrines such as the resurrection of Jesus, Paul gets his information from the Old Testament scriptures. Even when Paul seems to quote Jesus, his only named sources are the Old Testament scriptures, and his 'direct channel' to the divine 'Lord'. He did not witness the events of Jesus' life (nor does he specifically say when and where they happened), nor can it be assumed that he learned of these events from fellow mortals (such as Peter and James); he specifically rules this out, which is surprising, if he knew Jesus' relatives and closest followers.[890] In any case, Paul did not seem to have a pleasant relationship with Peter, presumably one of the most credible and sought-after eyewitnesses, as he "opposed him to his face".[891] Scholar of religion James Tabor also notices Paul's spurious sources:

> This mean (*sic*) the essentials of the message Paul preaches is not coming from those who were with Jesus, whom Paul sarcastically calls the "so-called pillars of the church" –

> adding “what they are means nothing to me” (Galatians 2:6), but from voices, visions, and revelations that Paul is “hearing” and “seeing.” For some that is a strong foundation. For many, including most historians such “traditions” can not be taken as reliable historical testimony.[892]

It may even be asked why scholars should assume that Peter and James could have taught Paul anything worthwhile about the historical Jesus; historians know of the massive role they played largely because of the Gospels, which appear later in the historical record, and thus could be elaborating Paul’s more basic story. Without reading the Gospels into the Epistles, perhaps Peter’s and James’ experiences of Jesus were similar to Paul’s. Paul seems to imply as much,[893] whilst never discussing these other apostles’ relationships with an Earthly Jesus – in fact, Paul never unambiguously speaks of Jesus as ever having been on Earth. And yet, all Paul knows of Jesus comes from what was already written centuries earlier (akin to the theorised Old Testament midrashic-type tendencies of the Gospels), and from his own imagination. That Paul could be finding the gospel in a midrashic interpretation of the scriptures seems evident in Galatians 4, 1 Corinthians 11, and especially by the reference in 1 Corinthians 15:4 to the Messiah’s rising on the third day, which is not explicitly stated anywhere in the Old Testament. Carrier agrees:

> Even in Galatians 1, Paul is explicitly denying not only that he received any human tradition, but that such traditions would even have any worth to him or his fellow Christians. When we combine that fact, with what we know of the literary practices of the time, in the way stories and biographies were fabricated from sayings by (or even just attributed to) famous people (which often included nonexistent people), the mythicist case does not look as improbable as Ehrman portrays it.[894]

That Paul and other Jewish authors around the time are not relaying reliable historical information is certainly not a fringe idea. Paul admits that he is reinterpreting the old scriptures, and Mark is very clearly allegorical (we all can agree about the allegedly fulfilled prophecies, at the very least). But even the second Gospel, that of Matthew, displays the same sort of pesher exegesis (finding the hidden meanings in scripture) evidenced by Jews such as those of the Qumran community, and the various contributors to the Talmud and the Dead Sea Scrolls. For example, Matthew 13:52 seems to hint at this, with Jesus describing righteous scribes or teachers of the law, who bring out “new treasures as well as

old".[895] With Luke and John being derivative (all the more with Luke if the shared 'Q material' is simply Luke copying Matthew or an extended version of Mark), we have very little reason to trust the Gospel accounts.

Getting back to the Epistles, note that while we unfortunately (conveniently?) don't have any of the letters written to Paul, we don't seem to have any hint in Paul's writings that people took issue with the seeming absurdity that Paul knows everything about Jesus from pesheric exegesis and spiritual revelations, when there were supposedly people around who actually saw – and knew – Jesus. Paul just acts as if this is all so normal. Maybe because it was. Maybe because that's how the earliest Christians knew Jesus. Through visions and through the manipulation of old scriptures. We ought to recognise that in his summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul goes on to mention Jesus' 'after-death' appearances (verses 5-8), yet fails to mention any 'before-death' appearances.

Regarding these appearances, Paul consistently uses the Greek word *ophthe*, which is often used in the New Testament to describe the appearance of a spiritual being, such as with Moses' and Elijah's appearances at Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17:3, Mark 9:4), God's appearance to Abraham (Acts 7:2), and Jesus' appearance to Paul (1 Corinthians 15:8).[896] Jesus historicists potentially face a problem. The author of the earliest extant writings of Jesus makes no reference to recent historical sources; he could even be considered as being one of the 'creators' of the Jesus character. And he can almost certainly be written off as a reliable and primary source of evidence for Jesus' historicity. The credibility of Paul's writings in regards to establishing Jesus' historicity is very much compromised.[897] New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann generally agrees:

> In short, Paul cannot be considered a reliable witness to either the teachings, the life, or the historical existence of Jesus.[898]

Mainstream scholar Margaret Barker also notes that Paul seems to only discuss a "Redeemer from heaven", rather than the "teacher from Galilee", who seems to have "disappeared from the tradition at a very early date, so early that one wonders whether it was ever there at all".[899]

It all came down to Paul, and he is a very dodgy source indeed. Apart from his belief in the supernatural, his claimed sources are not conducive to sound historical research, and as he is the earliest Christian writer, we have the very real possibility that later (i.e. Gospel) authors are building on and changing his basic story. Historicists might try to invoke imaginary sources to overcome all these problems, akin to Tolkien's Great Eagles, [900] but as we saw earlier, this path is multiply fallacious, and should lead to the mass resignations of such proponents. But while Paul cannot reasonably be invoked to support Jesus' historicity, he could still be used against it. Paul's writings provide historicists with even more problems. One of which, is that he barely mentions the Earthly or Gospel Jesus, if at all.[901]

Paul's Minimal, Unquotable Jesus

Paul has very little to say about Jesus' time on Earth, which is made particularly clear by his failing to record when and where the crucifixion happened;[902] the Gospels do the work of filling in the blanks, attempting to explain Jesus' life story.[903] Absurdly, Paul seems completely disinterested in a recent, Historical Jesus, as if such a concept would be secondary to Paul's primary message. Even Bart Ehrman admits that scholars have long been troubled by Paul's focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus, rather than his life.[904] This also did not escape the attention of the influential Albert Schweitzer:

> It is doubtless a fact in the history of Christian belief that for centuries, in a certain sense, the Gospel of Paul stood in the way of the Gospel of Jesus. How did this result come about? The attitude which Paul himself takes up towards the Gospel of Jesus is that he does not repeat it in the words of Jesus, and does not appeal to its authority.[905]

It is agreed by Jesus historicists[906] and mythicists[907] alike that the Pauline Epistles (and the non-Gospel Biblical books in general) have very little to say about Jesus' teachings and deeds. This seems suspicious when it is documents that appear much later in the historical record (the canonical Gospels) that expand on the basic story presented in the Epistles; it would be logical that it would be the later (and more detailed)

accounts that would be mythicized, not the earlier, more concise accounts.[908] It is almost as if Paul, if he knew about the Historical Jesus, was thoroughly unimpressed by him.[909] Ehrman dismisses this relative silence of the epistles, asserting, "That this was common knowledge should be clear from our Gospel sources…"[910] These are Ehrman's hypothetical sources on which he relies so heavily; the Gospels are post-Pauline, so the conclusions would likely differ if historicists such as Ehrman treated them as such, and did not read the later Gospel story into the earlier texts.

It is even more surprising that Paul finds himself in many situations where he could quote Jesus and thus proclaim his authority, yet does not:

> Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.[911]

> Now about food sacrificed to idols… But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do…[912]

> Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?[913]

With regards to the dietary laws, Paul could have simply deferred to Jesus' authority:

> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."[914]

There are numerous instances of Paul having the opportunity to simplify his task or amplify his message by appealing to Jesus' authority, yet fails to. When Paul recommended celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:7-8), he could have quoted Matthew 19:10-12. When he indicates that Christians should pay their taxes (Romans 13:1-6), Paul could have quoted Mark 12:17. When discussing circumcision (Romans 3:1, Galatians 5:1-12),

Paul could have referred to Jesus' own circumcision as discussed in Luke 2:21. When Paul (and also Peter) promotes obedience to the apparently god-sent Roman authorities who only punish the wicked,[915] he unforgivably 'forgot' what they did to Jesus, the most righteous man who ever lived. Instead of stressing the importance of his own teachings, Paul could have reminded everybody of what Jesus had directly or indirectly taught them.[916] It is as if nobody is aware of anything about Jesus, unless they are told by people like Paul, who have received visions from him.

Rather than uncharacteristically and arrogantly ordering Christians to imitate himself, since he supposedly imitates Christ, Paul could have told them to imitate the big dog himself, by using their knowledge of Jesus' life story.[917] It is as if there were no eyewitnesses to an Earthly Jesus or sources (à la Ehrman's overactive imagination) that provided a more direct route to Christ, and instead, we smallfolk just had to take Paul's word for it. This makes perfect sense if there was no Jesus and authorities like Paul who claimed revelations of a cosmic Christ controlled early Christian thought and practice. Indeed, Paul outright says this, effectively claiming that Christians only know about Jesus because of chosen ones like himself:

> How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"[918]

Paul's brain farts get even worse. Instead of scoffing at the Jews who were demanding signs, or miracles, Paul could have mentioned the multitude of miracles that Jesus supposedly performed.[919] Indeed, it seems virtually impossible that Paul would here overlook the opportunity to remind them of the greatest sign (elsewhere, Paul seems quite obsessed with it), that of Jesus' recent death and resurrection on Earth, which Jesus apparently prophesied, to 'the Jews':

> Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days

> and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."[920]

We might even expect that Paul might berate 'the Jews' for actually witnessing such a sign, while he himself did not, and yet he still believes. Furthermore, Paul and other Christians apparently don't know how to pray (Romans 8:26), despite the 'fact' that Jesus already taught them the Lord's Prayer![921] It is already strange that Paul would fail to mention such things; but to fail to mention these precisely when he'd be expected to is remarkable. Even Ehrman acknowledges the *greater* issue that there are instances where Paul actually seems to be quoting Jesus, without giving him due credit (though Ehrman concludes that Paul is paraphrasing later documents; a presupposed conclusion).[922]

There is no indication that anyone took any issue with this, though Mark 1:22 shows the *amazement* of people witnessing Jesus teaching from his own authority, unlike the Torah-touting Scribes. Perhaps, when it came to Paul staking his own claim, Paul lacked Jesus' charisma and ability to generate unwanted attention. Perhaps the people cared not about Paul's plagiarising of their beloved saviour. And perhaps there is some very good but unknown reason for why Paul fails to use Jesus' authority, and, like the Scribes (generally taken to be enemies of Jesus), relies on the Old Testament for his message. Jesus historicists noting such anomalies include Gerd Lüdemann:

> One must record with some surprise the fact that Jesus' teachings seem to play a less vital role in Paul's religious and ethical instruction than does the Old Testament... not once does Paul refer to Jesus as a teacher, to his words as teaching, or to Christians as disciples. In this regard it is of the greatest significance that when Paul cites "sayings of Jesus," they are never so designated; rather, without a single exception, he attributes such sayings to "the Lord."[923]

It is possible that Paul just did not feel the need to invoke Jesus' authority, as his readers already knew these teachings (and deeds) of Jesus. That explanation loses power however, given that scholars only know of these 'teachings of Jesus' because of post-Pauline documents. Scholars must accept the possibility that such teachings or sayings originated with Paul or other 'apostles' (or even other religious traditions altogether), and only later were ascribed to Jesus, in the Gospels, or perhaps in 'sayings

documents' such as *Q* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, which could have appeared in the historical record between the Pauline Epistles and the canonical Gospels.[924] It could be that Paul – with his disinterest in Jesus' recent life events and teachings – presents a 'stripped-down' portrayal of the Jesus of the Gospels; given that Paul's writings appear earlier however, it seems more plausible that the Gospels are elaborating on Paul's Epistles. And scholars are increasingly thinking just that.[925]

Indeed, the idea that Mark and the other Gospel writers fabricated stories about Jesus based on sayings – that could have originated with anyone, or Pauline-type 'divine revelations' – has much historical precedent.[926] It could be that Paul wishes to minimise the importance of Jesus' life so as to increase his own importance, relative to the likes of Peter and James, who knew Jesus personally while he was on Earth. But this, of course, assumes the veridicality of the later Gospel accounts, which is precisely what we are questioning, and also faces the problem that Paul never seems to feel the need to belittle the others' direct relationships with Jesus, or explicitly say that he is worth listening to despite the fact that he didn't run with Jesus.

Consider also that Paul's being inexplicably more interested in revelations and the Old Testament than in the supposedly existing sayings of the Gospel Jesus is made even clearer by his homophobic and misogynistic instructions.[927] There are no records of Jesus ever saying such things, but this fits right at home in Old Testament theology. And it is also absurd that Paul, and similar authors, would not even make a passing reference to something that links Jesus to Earth, at a certain time, and a certain place. Even just by accident. Or that Paul's readers would not have asked for clarification over what Jess really said, just as modern scholars do. Even once. This all defies probability.

Whether Jesus existed or not, Paul seems completely disinterested in a recent, Historical Jesus; as if such a concept would be of only secondary importance to Paul's primary aim: the dissemination of Pauline theology. Paul's fervent preaching about history's most important person, without ever – even in part – talking about this person's important history, seems unthinkable. Paul's silence over the Historical Jesus does not make the

latter's existence impossible, but it should surely count as being quite improbable.

Paul's Cosmic Christ

And now we come to the climax.[928] There is yet another problem that the earliest Christian documents present for the increasingly desperate historicists: Paul might not actually believe in an earthy Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels. As I so revealingly asked earlier, why would we assume that Paul does believe in the Gospels' Jesus? Even historicists have recognised that the Jesus that appears in the Pauline letters (and other epistles) is very different from the Jesus that appears in the canonical Gospels.[929] There is no verse among the Pauline Epistles that specifically ties Jesus' death (or indeed, his life) to a specific time and place. It is thanks to the canonical Gospels, that Biblical historians understand that Jesus died in Jerusalem under the reign of Pontius Pilate.[930] But we don't know that from our earliest author/s.

The Gospels are post-Pauline, and cannot be assumed to contain the earliest traditions of Jesus. Scholars ought to consider the possibilities of what Paul is saying, without the knowledge of later documents that could be expanding on the story. With that in consideration, the epistles offer some curious passages that could indicate that the Jesus portrayed by Paul and the other epistle writers is not a fleshly and human Jesus that recently appeared on Earth:

> If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law.[931]

> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.[932]

Here is a Jesus that could be located in another realm, and who is timeless. The first passage, from the book of Hebrews, seems to refer to Jesus' not having been on Earth.[933] The second, the so-called Philippians hymn, seems to indicate a Jesus who merely had the appearance of a man, and was possibly only named 'Jesus' and exalted by God *after* his death (there is a potential Old Testament parallel here with Jacob being named Israel after defeating Yahweh),[934] which implies a very different view of Jesus, such as a heavenly, celestial, or angelic Jesus.[935] Just what is going on here?! Keep in mind that, while this differs from the Gospels, and the name in question is debated, it actually makes perfect sense for 'Jesus' to be so named *after* all this had happened.

The name 'Yahweh saves' would seem quite silly, had Jesus, or whatever his name was before, failed.[936] This is the story of Yehoshua (YHWH is salvation), after all, not the story of Yeho*lo*shua (YHWH is *not* salvation). Yet we have Jesus being named as such at the very beginning of the Gospels, before we know that he was successful, which doesn't make sense when you think about it – particularly if you're an atheist who doesn't believe in Jewish prophecies. In other words, the very (punny) name of Jesus seems to betray theological intent, and the use of it in the Gospels as contrasted with the earlier Christian documents could lend some support to the view that the earlier Christians did not believe that Jesus was born on Earth.[937] But wait, there's more:

> In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.[938]

This quotation from the deutero-Pauline Ephesians remarkably neglects any hint of recent historical evidence, referring instead to God's revelation, "now", through apostles like Paul, decades after the alleged events of the Gospels, and possibly alluding to Christianity's status as a mystery religion. Consider also that 'Paul' claims that Jesus, seemingly identified as "the mystery", "was *seen* by angels", but apparently 'only' "*preached* among the nations" and "*believed on* in the world".[939] Back to Hebrews, that author seems to make it very clear that Jesus' perfect sacrifice did not take place on Earth, unlike the imperfect animal

sacrifices, with the latter seemingly eliminating the possibility of a terrestrial *and* extraterrestrial Jesus existing simultaneously:

> It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence… The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.[940]

Keeping in mind that that certain ancient Pagans and Jews believed in Earthly/Heavenly counterparts, the counterpart to Jesus' sacrifice in the heavens seems to be the entire set of animal sacrifices on Earth, rather than some 'Earthly Jesus'. The passage also seems to directly contradict the Gospel story, which does have Jesus entering the Temple, which certainly was made with human hands. Mythicists contend that such verses indicate a 'cosmic Christ'; one that did not appear on Earth, but in some sort of Platonic 'lower heaven'.[941] Whether this figure was purely spiritual – whatever that means – or was indeed fleshly, such a view of Jesus would suggest that he might have originally been an entirely mythical figure that was later historicised, rather than a historical figure that was later mythicised.

(Note that, as with Paul's authentic letters, some verses in the other epistles could support historicity, but they are actually *multiply* ambiguous [in that they could be allegorical, or could otherwise support mythicism], such as references to Jesus' blood and flesh. These verses work just as well on mythicism. While we often associate otherworldly beings of religious significance with some sort of 'spiritual substance', celestial beings of flesh and blood are well attested in Pagan and Jewish literature. One example of such ambiguity is Hebrews 5:7, which speaks of Jesus' flesh. Interestingly, some English [mis]translations read something like "During the days of Jesus' life on Earth", rather than the more accurate "In the days of his flesh".)

That Jesus was a mystery that is only "now" – the time of Paul and other epistle authors – being revealed by God would be problematic to the view of Jesus as having literally lived and died on Earth a few decades

earlier, but actually seems to be a theme throughout the epistles, including Paul's, and the letters of other early Christians like Peter, and those pretending to be Paul:

> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.[942]

> Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. [943]

> Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. [944]

> My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. [945]

> He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.[946]

The first two passages, from Romans, seem to indicate that Christ has only "now" (the time of Paul) been revealed, possibly by Paul himself and the apostles before him, through God and the Jewish scriptures, rather than several decades ago via a whole host of impressive miracles and sermons. This seems incompatible with the view of the Gospels that place Jesus' life long before Paul's first writings. Once again however, it must be noted that the Gospels are the later accounts, and could possibly be elaborating (and changing) Paul's story. That the Gospels are set in a far earlier time should not count as evidence that they actually do contain factual information about Jesus from that time. The next two passages, from Colossians (whether written by Paul or another author), also seem to indicate that Christ is being revealed "now", through special people,

around the time when the author is writing, rather than much earlier and much more directly as portrayed in the Gospels.

Just who are these people that God has chosen to share his wonderful message? Paul the Apostle was obviously one of them. Is that what an apostle actually is? A human conduit for supernatural teachings? Interestingly, Paul seems to think himself on equal footing with other important apostles, like James and Cephas (Peter), as if they all were apostles because of Christ's revelations, rather than having spent time with a human Jesus who was on Earth...[947] Indeed, amidst talk of himself and Cephas as apostles, Paul seems to warn against contradictory stories from other 'revelatory apostles'.[948] Of course, such theorising is only possible when crucial and unjustified assumptions deriving from the later documents, such as the Gospels (where apostles are the Earthly Jesus' closest disciples), are not accepted.

Now the important "Christ in you" mystery of Colossians 1 also appears somewhat Gnostic (referring to a pantheistic notion of inner divinity), and may lend some support to Doherty's theory that the Jesus of the epistles was considered to exist (in the style of mystery religions) only in a Platonic 'lower heaven'.[949] This theory is not necessarily without precedent; second-century Church Father Irenaeus seems to hint at the existence of Christians with such unorthodox beliefs in his *Against Heresies*: "For they declare that all these transactions were counterparts of what took place above."[950]

The *Ascension of Isaiah*, oft-seen as a first century text (the relevant section could possibly pre-date all other Christian texts, or at least the Gospels), also seems to describe a Celestial Jesus' death, at the hands of demons who did not know his true identity, and triumphant return, in some upper realm, whilst also specifying that there are heavenly counterparts to Earthly objects/events.[951] And we do know that certain Jews and Christians of the era did believe in heavenly conflict, as evidence by intertestamental literature (such as in the Dead Sea Scrolls), and the Book of Revelation.[952]

The existence of such documents and early Christians does not necessarily prove that Jesus did not exist. But if there were indeed early Christians that denied Jesus' literal and fleshy existence on Earth, *the idea of a Historical Jesus would seem incredibly implausible*. It seems that the only reason early Christians would deny such a Jesus would be that they were right – he didn't exist. Explaining away these 'extremely sceptical' early Christians, who supposedly lived in a time when the eyewitnesses to Jesus would have still been around, and who could have been eyewitnesses themselves, becomes a monumentally daunting task for the historicist. Especially considering the polemical benefits of an Earthly/historical Jesus that the proto-Catholics surely knew about, denying a recent, Earthly Jesus seems to be a virtual impossibility. Admittedly veering dangerously close to the sort of speculative reasoning I opposed when I criticised the criteria of embarrassment and dissimilarity, it seems unimaginable that early Christians could think this way, if Jesus had recently strolled about Jerusalem.

Interestingly, while Paul never mentions when and where Jesus was on Earth, the author of Colossians takes the time to reveal the important "mystery" that Christ is "in you", which might harmonise with Jesus' assertion in the *Gospel of Thomas* (saying 3) that the kingdom of God is "inside you".[953] So instead of a quote like, 'Jesus was born, bred, and killed in first-century Palestine,' we have 'Jesus is inside you'. This sounds less like objective and reliable history, and more like feel-good, pantheistic preaching. Also, Paul seems to indicate that Jesus' crucifixion was effected by the mythic and demonic *archons* (1 Corinthians 2:6-10), which is usually translated as "the rulers of this age", rather than by Roman authorities on Earth:

> We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" – the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.[954]

This passage indicates that Jesus was killed by malign and non-Earthly beings, which is an interpretation certainly not limited to mythicists. There are numerous mainstream secular and even Christian scholars who share this view, whilst some of the most influential early Christians thought so as well.[955] After all, had human authorities known who Jesus was and what his death would accomplish (namely, their – and everyone else's – salvation), they would have had even more reason to kill Jesus, not less, as Paul seems to assert.[956] It's not like Jesus would have opposed them. This was his mission, his *raison d'être*! If various Jews were willing to kill innocent animals, and Abraham was ready to kill his own son, and numerous others were/are willing to kill themselves, to appease God, it should not be unthinkable that Jesus would be killed by his own followers, especially when he specifically comes as one willing to be sacrificed.[957]

It would only be the likes of Satan, and his cronies, those who would be defeated by Jesus' atoning sacrifice, who would have refused to kill Jesus, had they known who he truly was, and what he set out to do.[958] None of this sounds historical, of course. It doesn't even sound like a historical story that was later embellished. It sounds purely mythical. And this interpretation just happens to cohere well with the Celestial Jesus' death and resurrection portrayed in the early and non-canonical Christian document, the *Ascension of Isaiah*. The latter interpretation fits minimal mythicism perfectly, while the former would at least be less expected (if not completely outrageous) on minimal historicity. And in formal expression, less expected means less probable. Given that Paul, our earliest Christian source, presents Jesus' crucial crucifixion as either a non-historical event or a supernatural event, which effectively makes little difference to us atheists, proponents of the Gospel-influenced Historical Jesus might be feeling a little anxious.[959]

Note again how Paul's information seems to be derived from revelation, revealed to the elect/mature, and possibly also found through searching the old scriptures.[960] This point, as well as the involvement of sky-demons, should make it very clear that this is not a proper historical account, which is a major problem since Paul is our earliest Christian source. Recall also that Paul believes that Earthly authorities are to be respected, that they are sent by God, and that they only punish those that

deserve to be punished.[961] Peter said something similar.[962] It could hardly be believed that the very same Paul would now think that his beloved Roman rulers were responsible for Jesus' death. He surely must be accusing the demonic powers, just as other early Christians had done.

This infernal interpretation of the passage also coheres well with the Pauline theme of the mystery of Christ, and the resulting parallel with the *Ascension of Isaiah*, where secrecy was paramount, so that the demons wouldn't catch on and end up refusing to kill Jesus. This need for secrecy also perfectly explains why Paul, who mentions many of Jesus' post-mortem appearances, never mentions a single before-death appearance. Simply, Jesus didn't appear to his people until he died. No one was to know, because it was a secret, as indicated again and again. In fact, according to Paul, Jesus might not have even been called 'Jesus' until he died and was resurrected.[963] Contrast this with the later Gospels, where, on account of the not-so-subtle Nativity narratives alone, the demons would have known about Jesus' mission (and did).[964]

Clearly, Paul is telling us that the demons didn't know whom they were killing, and that the Earthlings didn't know this was even happening (seemingly the point of the "no eye has seen" bit). Jesus was killed by demons, in an otherworldly realm, unbeknownst to humans, and it is only *now* being revealed to us; now that the mission had been a success. It's not like Paul didn't believe in demons and fallen angels. Heck, he even warned women to cover their heads so as not to entice the bad angels to shag them![965] Paul also calls Satan the 'god of this age' and the 'ruler in the sky'.[966] If there is any doubt about this early Christian belief that Jesus was killed by sky-demons, and thereby triumphed over them, consider the strange comments in Colossians 2:13-15:

> When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Once again, we are told that the archons are defeated by Jesus, through his death. But when were the Romans made fools of? When were they

defeated? Certainly not by the insignificant itinerant preacher known as the Historical Jesus, or the Jews in general.[967] Nay, the Romans were the ones that did the defeating. They were not the ones in danger of getting killed when opening their front doors. They were the danger. They were the ones who knocked. And they continued to kick ass for many centuries afterwards. Again, this passage only makes sense with a *spiritual victory*, with a victory over the sky-demons. Also consider that there was no great need for Jesus' redemptive act to have happened on Earth. It only needed to happen, someplace, with the good news communicated to Earthlings, such as Paul, James, and Peter, who claimed revelations of such. In fact, for this monumental event to happen, unseen, in some inaccessible realm, is actually advantageous to the earliest adherents, as nobody could contradict them, which could more easily happen if the claims were made about an Earthly figure.

There may be an interesting similarity with the misfortune to befall the Jesus of Paul and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and the Jesus of the *Apocryphon of James*, which – depending on interpretation – has him being buried shamefully, by Satan; a far cry from the honourable burial by Joseph of Arimathea that we find in the Gospels.[968] The burial of Jesus seems to become more honourable over time, according to the Gospel record, so that it could well be that the 'shameful burial' tradition is the earlier one, and perhaps echoed by the plight of the suffering servant in Isaiah 52-53. While we might expect Christians to change the story to make Jesus' burial more honourable, we would hardly expect them to alter the story to make it more shameful, as well as mythical. This may help explain why Joseph of Arimathea,[969] and even Arimathea itself, is found nowhere outside the Christian texts,[970] and why this character is only mentioned in the canonical texts as being involved with Jesus' burial. It is as if he was only created because the other major characters were placed elsewhere.[971]

Moving on from the *archons* issue, mentions of Jesus' 'coming' in the epistles don't seem to, or at least need not, refer to 'the second coming'.[972] Without the knowledge of the Gospels, perhaps these references refer to 'the first coming'; in other words, there may again be a hint that Jesus had not recently been on Earth. Indeed, Paul seems to think that

salvation has come “now” (in Paul’s day), which might astonish believers who think that is what Jesus (not Paul) had already provided much earlier, as attested to in the Gospels:

> For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.[973]

The latter portion of First Corinthians 15 (vv. 44-50) seems to further distance Paul’s ‘Cosmic Christ’ (a saviour figure that did not exist on Earth, but in a Platonic or mystical realm) from the ‘Earthly Jesus’ of the Gospels. While the Gospels specify that Jesus was physically resurrected “in the flesh” (Matthew 28:9, Luke 24:42-43, John 20:24-29), Paul goes to great lengths to say that it is a ‘spiritual body’[974] that is resurrected (v. 44), claims that the “last Adam” (Christ) was or became a life-giving spirit (v. 45), hints that while Adam was an earthly being, Jesus is a heavenly being (v. 47), then declares that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 50).

While this definitely contradicts the Gospels, this may seem problematic for our minimal mythicism too, as we have numerously stated that references to Jesus’ flesh and blood can also refer to a purely Celestial Jesus. The solution is in the timing, which resolves the potential contradiction. The Celestial Jesus was initially a spirit, which became a flesh and blood being, in order to die a proper ‘fleshly death’, for our benefit. Then, unlike in the Gospels, Jesus was raised as a spirit. This makes perfect sense in light of the “In the days of his flesh” comment of Hebrews 5:7. Now the following verse in 1 Corinthians 15 happens to refer to a “mystery” (v. 51), which could allude to the mystery religions with which Christianity shares so much in common. The plot thickens.

Also of note is that Paul refers to other letters he had written, which are no longer extant.[975] Historians can only speculate on what these letters contained, and why later Christians may have decided to dispose of them. Had these letters made it more obvious that Paul was preaching a purely Celestial Jesus, it would not be surprising if more orthodox-type Christians (who believed in an Earthly – and fleshly – Jesus) would censor

them; a practice well within their capabilities, as noted by historian Robert Wilken:

> When Christianity gained control of the Roman Empire it suppressed the writings of its critics and even cast them into flames.[976]

Tabor also recognises the historical problems that Paul's 'heavenly Christ' presents:

> Paul is all for "Christ," but cares little for Jesus as he was on earth as a human being. He minimizes those who knew Jesus and those whom Jesus personally chose to represent him. All now comes from "the Lord," but he means by this a "Christ spirit" that speaks directly to Paul, his special chosen one, with direct voice contact and information. What this means for any reconstruction of the faith of Jesus' original followers, that is, those who actually knew him, is critical. All too often it is assumed that by going to Paul, whose letters are the earliest Christian documents we have, we are getting closer to the historical Jesus – when actually quite the opposite might well be the case.[977]

Though the idea of this purely divine/celestial Jesus communicating to his followers like Paul through revelations may be unpopular, it is well precedented, even in the monotheistic and/or Abrahamic religious traditions. Mormons think that Moroni conversed with Joseph Smith. Muslims believe that Gabriel taught Muhammad. Even the Jews believed that Yahweh himself spake to Moses, whilst Zoroaster supposedly received revelations from Ahura Mazda. Extraordinarily, the Manicheans believed that Mani received his divine communications from his heavenly twin (*syzygos*)[978] – which further demonstrates that the concept of heavenly counterparts was widespread.[979] We reasonably doubt all of these traditions, the historicity of the initiators, and even, in some cases, the historicity of the recipients. A purely celestial Jesus who had never been incarnated as a man on Earth, and who communicated with Paul, from some heavenly realm, is therefore not an absurd idea. And Paul doesn't seem to be the only Christian graced with such exchanges.

As alluded to earlier, the epistle of James presents similar challenges to Jesus historicists (as does the epistle of 1 Peter).[980] James fails to share any of his knowledge of the Earthly Jesus, which is very surprising – i.e. unexpected, and therefore improbable – if he is Jesus' brother.[981] Notably, James never claims this himself, and nor does Jude (supposedly

the brother of Jesus and James), despite specifying that he is James' brother.[982] As if being the brother of James is far more noteworthy than being the biological and Earthly brother of God incarnate! Nor is this hypothesised familial bond mentioned by the author of Luke-Acts, despite her/his apparent familiarity with Paul and James.[983] Also, James, unlike Paul, is seemingly uninterested in the resurrection.

Religious Studies scholar Matt Jackson-McCabe recognises that, to James, it is the deeds of the 'heavenly Christ' that are of importance.[984] Had the canonical Gospels pre-dated the epistles, it could be understandable that authors such as Paul and James would focus more on the 'post-resurrection heavenly Christ' as opposed to the 'historical Jesus' (though the silence over the recent Earthly Jesus is still pretty unforgivable). As the Epistles are the earlier documents however, the possibility that the Gospels expand on the earlier stories, and literally 'flesh out' the character of Jesus, cannot be ignored. Such a scenario seems more obvious when the various sources are placed in order of composition. But first, a brief interlude on Philo and his *Logos*.

Philo's Pre-Christian and Pre-Pauline 'Celestial Jesus'

That Paul's Jesus is a celestial being, who appeared in visions, and may have existed in outer space rather than on Earth, is a popular argument from mythicists, and also essentially accepted by the odd historicist – so obvious is the disjuncture between the Gospels' and Epistles' portrayals of Jesus.[985] Interestingly, Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE-50 CE), a supposed contemporary of Jesus, whose writings predate those of Paul and other New Testament authors, makes no mention of Jesus of Nazareth or his followers, despite his numerous ties to the Temple priesthood and the rulers of Palestine and Rome, and despite his having much to say about first-century Jewish sects. However, Philo does refer to a celestial figure called the *Logos*.[986] This *Logos* figure is variously described by the allegorically-inclined and Platonist Philo as the 'firstborn son of God',[987] the celestial "image of God",[988] God's agent of creation,[989] and

God's high priest;[990] all things the earliest Christians also believed of Jesus.

Philo also insists that believers should emulate this *Logos* figure,[991] and describes him as the expiator of sins and mediator for mankind, just like Christians say of Jesus.[992] If Philo's messianic *Logos* and Paul's (and other epistle authors') Christ are unrelated, it would seem to be a great coincidence, particularly as we previously saw that stories about Jesus frequently borrow from Jewish, Pagan, and Jewish-Pagan (Hellenistic) sources. An equally impressive coincidence would be that in discussing this seemingly nameless figure,[993] Philo refers to an Old Testament passage, which provides the one thing that is necessary to start a religion: a *name*.[994] (The one thing we don't need is an Earthly Jesus – in fact, it works better without one. The Earthly Jesus might simply be an effect, and not a cause of early Christianity.) In the Septuagint, which is an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, and possibly more reliable than the oft-used Hebrew Masoretic version,[995] this figure is given the name "Jesus", which is the equivalent of "Joshua", as used in the Hebrew versions:[996]

> Nor was the idea of a pre-existent spiritual son of God a novel idea among the Jews anyway. Paul's contemporary, Philo, interprets the messianic prophecy of Zechariah 6:11-12 in just such a way. In the Septuagint this says to place the crown of kingship upon "Jesus," for "So says Jehovah the Ruler of All, 'Behold the man named 'Rises', and he shall rise up from his place below and he shall build the House of the Lord'." This pretty much is the Christian Gospel.[997]

Whether this 'a crown for Jesus' passage in Zechariah was meant to foreshadow the future Jesus Christ or not, as Christians might like to think, what matters is how Philo interprets this passage, and how he potentially goes on to influence Paul, and ultimately, the Gospel authors.[998] Earlier in Zechariah, it appears that this high priest Jesus somehow symbolises a future Jesus, God's servant: "High Priest Jesus, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch."[999] So does Philo actually associate Zechariah's Jesus with his supernatural and divine *Logos* figure? It seems so, in his *On the Confusion of Tongues*:

> "Behold, the man named Rises!" is a very novel appellation indeed, if you consider it as spoken of a man who is compounded of body and soul. But if you look upon it as applied to that incorporeal being who in no respect differs from the divine image, you will then agree that the name of 'Rises' has been given to him with great felicity. For the Father of the Universe has caused him to rise up as the eldest son, whom, in another passage, he calls the firstborn. And he who is thus born, imitates the ways of his father…[1000]

To Philo, Zechariah's Jesus is the 'firstborn', the celestial *Logos*. Carrier further notes that Zechariah's Jesus shall "rule".[1001] Equally significant is that this likely influence on Christianity also believed in celestial realms, persons, and objects, down to the "celestial plants, which the planter caused to spring up from the incorporeal light".[1002] That Philo discusses a pre-Christian (and Jewish), pre-Pauline Celestial Jesus who was not on Earth, and who shares many characteristics with Paul's alleged 'Cosmic Christ' and the Gospels' 'Earthly Jesus', is of great importance to the case made by Jesus mythicists, and should surely be an area of further research. There are important implications on the origins of the Jesus story, but also of early Christianity and Christian Gnosticism, such as providing a possible explanation of how Platonic thought could have influenced Christianity far earlier than initially imagined.[1003]

More mainstream Religious Studies scholars Joe Barnhart and Linda Kraeger also allude to Paul's Platonic influence, via Philo, and perhaps other Jewish and Roman sources.[1004] You might be surprised at how many mainstream scholars have inadvertently contributed to the development and/or reasonableness of the 'Celestial Jesus theory'. Indeed, this intriguing theory did not originate in a vacuum. It is grounded in good evidence, and is inherently plausible. The respected biblical scholar L. Michael White is yet another who recognised similarities between the ideas of Philo and early Christians.[1005]

It is certainly not an absurd notion that the all-important Markan author was influenced by the ambiguous and mystical Paul, who was influenced by Philo, who, in turn, was influenced by Pagan/Platonist and Gnostic thought. Interestingly, historian David Brakke notes that many Gnostic interpretations "find parallels in Philo".[1006] Furthermore, there was some confusion amongst early (though post-Gospel) Christians – such as Eusebius and Saint Jerome – as to whether Philo and/or the Jewish and

ascetic Therapeutae he thought highly of,[1007] were Christians.[1008] Imagine that, Christians before Jesus![1009]

In light of all this, it certainly does not seem far-fetched that Philo's *Logos* could be the immediate predecessor to Jesus Christ. In other words, it seems quite plausible that Philo's other-worldly and spiritual *Logos*, already similar to Jewish apocalypticists' celestial Messiah/Christ,[1010] would evolve into Paul's other-worldly but fleshly Christ, culminating in the Gospels' portrayal of an Earthly and fleshly 'Biblical/Gospel Jesus'. That doesn't bode well for the Historical Jesus, who is the mainstream secular scholars' stripped-down version of the Biblical Jesus.

The Evolution of Jesus

It is all too easy to read the Gospels into the Pauline Epistles, especially for unsuspecting Christian believers who find the Gospels at the front of their Bibles. This is certainly an uncritical approach in dealing with the differences in the stories between the Gospels and the Epistles. For example, Paul gives a different list of resurrection appearances than that offered by the Gospels:

> … and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.[1011]

Paul could be referring to the twelve Apostles of the Gospels. However, the Gospels appear later in the record. When Paul mentions "the Twelve", he offers no details; he certainly does not name them. It is possible that Cephas (Peter) is not one of "the Twelve". Somehow, Paul may have also 'forgotten' that Judas had died by then, so this might be more accurately described as "the Eleven" (Judas' replacement, Matthias, was appointed many weeks later according to Acts chapter 1, a later document). Luke 24 claims that Jesus did indeed appear to "the Eleven", potentially exposing the contradiction with Paul's writings. Scholars can come up with numerous apologetic explanations; but the simplest explanation is to theorise that "the Twelve" (and perhaps the "pillars of the Church") of the Epistles differs from that of the Gospels, especially when the Gospels appear later and could have expanded on Paul's story.

Another example of reading the Gospels into the Epistles is a reference from Galatians that is often used[1012] to discredit mythicists' claims of a non-literal Jesus in Paul's writings:

> Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord's brother.[1013]

It would seem obvious that, if genuine, this is clear evidence of a historical Jesus in Paul's Epistles.[1014] If Jesus did or did not exist, his 'brother' would certainly have known about it. However, throughout the New Testament, James himself never makes any such claim that he is Jesus' biological brother. Also, it seems a little curious that Paul never seems to reference James on details about Jesus' earthly life. And, of course, most scholars assume that James is Jesus' biological brother because of the Gospel accounts;[1015] but the Gospels are post-Pauline. Reading Paul as Paul, without the influence of the Gospels, it could be possible that the term "Lord's brother" is not intended to be taken literally and could refer to some sort of believer's hierarchy.

After all, Paul and other believers called Christians 'brothers', despite not being literal siblings. Paul says that Jesus is the first among many brethren, and makes it very clear that all (baptised) Christians are sisters and brothers of the Lord.[1016] It proved to be quite popular, with Christian fictive kinship continuing to this day, bro. Expanding the idea, Paul even spoke of being a father to those he preached to;[1017] a tradition that also has somewhat survived to the present day. Origen of Alexandria lends support to this non-literal interpretation, claiming that Paul "says that he regarded this James as a brother of the Lord, not so much on account of their relationship by blood, or of their being brought up together, as because of his virtue and doctrine."[1018]

So too does the early 'Gnostic' Christian document, *First Apocalypse of James*, where Jesus explicitly tells James, "For not without reason have I called you my brother, although you are not my brother materially." Gnostics may have other motives for claiming this, however (the theological belief that the flesh is evil), though the irreligious and

contemporary scholar Hoffmann also alluded to the unlikelihood that Paul is referring to a literal brother of a historical Jesus:

> In the light of Paul's complete disregard for the "historical" Jesus, moreover, it is unimaginable that he would assert a biological relationship between James and "the Lord"… The James who is head of the church in Jerusalem is not a biological brother of Jesus. Later but inconsistent gospel references to James are muddled reminiscences based on the more prominent James of the Pauline tradition.[1019]

Back to the 'Gnostics', and 'alternative' early Christians in general, our good friend Bart Ehrman realises that there is some anti-Docetic or anti-Gnostic undercurrent to several of Paul's writings, supposing that changes have been made to make it more obvious that Jesus definitely appeared in the flesh, on Earth. This includes the very book, Galatians, where the James reference is located, with Ehrman thinking it odd that Tertullian is not using Pauline passages that support his views, in his tirades against the 'Gnostic' Marcion, who did not accept that Jesus had had an Earthly birth.[1020] Ehrman is right to be suspicious, and should have been more so. We see that Tertullian, in book 5 of his *Against Marcion*, which deals with Galatians, knows about Paul's visit to Jerusalem, described by the latter in Galatians chapter 2.

There's just one problem.

Our current version of Galatians 2 uses the word 'again', indicating that Paul went *twice*, the other journey being briefly recounted in Galatians chapter 1, which Tertullian doesn't bother to mention here. Let's walk through this, step by step.[1021] In chapter 2 of book 5, Tertullian makes use of Galatians 1, but is apparently unaware of the 'smoking gun' that is the James/1st visit passage (vv. 18-19). Then, in chapter 3 of his book, which focuses on Galatians 2 and Galatians 3, Tertullian mentions Paul's visit (rather than visits) to Jerusalem, making reference to Galatians 2:1, where Paul describes his '2nd visit'. Tertullian has somehow conspired to ignore Paul's first visit to Jerusalem.

Yet it is in that other, first visit, described in Galatians 1, where Paul apparently met Jesus' brother (and also stayed with Cephas/Peter for 15 days). Tertullian surely would have mentioned this, and excitedly

emphasised it, unless of course, this passage didn't exist in his day. It is unthinkable that Tertullian, who wrote a *series* of angry books against Marcion, would ignore such an important passage, precisely when you'd expect him to invoke it, especially when he already refers to passages before and after it. We would expect Tertullian to say something like: "Take that Marcion, Jesus had a literal brother, James. He came out of the same vagina. He was born, from flesh, here on Earth. Checkmate!" Given that Tertullian is probably wading through Marcion's copy of Galatians and trying to prove that the latter corrupted it, he might have also added a cheeky, "Why are you trying to hide this crucial verse, bro? You so dodgy!"

(Also of note is that in the very next chapter of this book, chapter 4, Tertullian, now more concerned with Galatians 4-6, somehow 'forgets' to refer Marcion to the 'born of a woman, born under the law' bit from our contemporary version of Galatians 4:4, *despite actually quoting, word for word, the first half of that verse, and then the first half of the following verse*.[1022] Once again, this is precisely when we would expect Tertullian to layeth the smackdown on Marcion's 'anti-Earthly' view, and yet he just couldn't be bothered. In fact, it is worse than that. If authentic, Tertullian has inexplicably *gone out of his way* to avoid mentioning what could have potentially been the killing blow.

The fact that those crucial words were omitted, with the less interesting words immediately before and immediately after included, should have us scratching our heads. Perhaps the solution is to be found in what may be Tertullian's later work, *On the Flesh of Christ*, where he does seem aware of the 'born of a woman' bit. If this part of Tertullian's book is genuine, it still lends some support to non-literal interpretations, apart from the oddity that he knew of this crucial passage and didn't invoke it when necessary. Though he seemingly prefers the passage to say 'born', he acknowledges that it says 'made'.[1023] Whether this explains away the crucial omission or not [could interpolations also have found their way into the patristic writings?], something very strange is going on here.)

Recall how I noted the brevity of the description of Paul's first visit to Jerusalem. Apparently this incredibly important visit deserved only 2

verses, Galatians 1:18-19. It is as if the sole purpose, as expected with a later interpolation, was to quickly and unintrudingly associate Paul with Jesus' actual, fleshly, Earthly brother (James), and Jesus' bestie (Peter). Adding to the intrigue, verse 17 has Paul specifically saying that he *didn't* go to Jerusalem (at that time, but still interesting), and verse 20 has Paul saying that he isn't lying. Could verse 20 be the hypothesised interpolator being all deceptive, ironic, and meta?

Tellingly, mentions of James as the Lord's brother are absent from other early references to Galatians, as evidenced by Marcion and Irenaeus. While interpolation should always be a last resort to the mythicist dealing with 'challenging verses' in the Epistles, it certainly is a live – and likely – option in this case; certainly a problem for the one passage that *could* (it is still quite ambiguous, after all)[1024] link Jesus to Earth, in the recent past. It does seem very plausible that James is a brother from another mother. But you needn't take my word for it, or the word of flesh-despising Gnostics, or the word of Catholic theologians who uphold Mary's perpetual virginity. More mainstream scholars also think (or at the very least think it reasonable) that the passage is either an interpolation (including the 'again' in Galatians 2:1, meaning that the entire 'first Jerusalem trip' is definitely bogus), or that "the Lord's brother" is a title.[1025] In other words, many *historicist* scholars effectively admit that we have no authentic pre-Gospel reference to James being Jesus' biological brother.

It is worth noting that James is certainly not the only person thought to be the brother of what may be a purely mythical/fictional character.[1026] Greco-Roman rulers like Alexander and Caligula claimed divine lineage. That certainly doesn't mean that Zeus exists. Finally, while the ambiguity of the passage should preclude us from deciding either way, so that we can focus on other pieces of evidence, I do think that since Paul so often speaks of fictive kinship, that if he truly meant that James was Jesus' biological brother, he would have made it very clear. Throughout his writings, Paul *never* unambiguously refers to Jesus as having any biological brothers.

Of course, if we accept that Paul's writings were edited to make the existence of the Gospel Jesus more obvious, as even the staunch historicist Ehrman does, surely we have even more reason to doubt any passage therein that seemingly works against the Celestial Jesus theory. Another such passage among Paul's writings concerns the so-called 'Last Supper', or the Eucharist. It would be very easy to assume that Paul summarises this allegedly historical event, as discussed in the Gospels. But Paul's account is brief, theological, older, admits its supposedly supernatural source, and is preceded by what seems to be a hint of its allegorical nature. [1027]

In the immediately preceding chapter, Paul discusses sacrifices made to demons, claims that one cannot drink from the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons, and asserts that one cannot have a part in the table of the Lord and the table of demons.[1028] I fail to see why we should see any of this as veridical. Do demons exist, and did people actually drink and eat with demons? Or is this support for an allegorical or mystical reading of the 'event' described in the very next chapter, where Jesus is not a human on Earth but some sort of angelic being above? We would also do well to recognise that Paul's event is the '*Lord's* Supper', not the '*Last* Supper'.

In contrast with Paul's brief and mystical version, the Gospel accounts are longer, more detailed, younger, and declare this a historical event in Jesus' life on Earth.[1029] It is possible that the later Gospel accounts merely elaborate on what began as a vision of a past celestial event. These differences between the stories of the epistles and the stories of the Gospels cannot necessarily be harmonised, as the Gospels appeared after the Pauline epistles (though it is possible that they refer to earlier events – the unsubstantiated traditional view). What if we stopped reading the Gospels into the Epistles, and simply read Paul as Paul? This approach makes even more sense if we consider that the Gospels, or at least the first one, are not intended to be historically accurate.

There are clear and subtle differences between the disparate portrayals of Jesus which leads mythicists to suspect that the story of Jesus had evolved over time; the Gospel writers took Paul's basic story, placed Jesus in a specific time and place, and added the details. An interesting pattern

emerges if the various sources for Jesus are placed in order of composition, excluding of course, the vast majority of Ehrman's innumerable hypothetical sources. First, there are the Pauline (and perhaps other) Epistles. These are potentially followed by sayings collections, such as *Q* and the *Gospel of Thomas*.[1030] Finally comes Mark, the first narrative proper of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark is followed initially by Matthew and Luke, and eventually by John. Generally, the remaining books of the Bible appear later, as do most of the early Church writings. Let's elaborate.

Before Paul's writings, elements of Jesus' teachings, characteristics, and deeds can be found in earlier mythologies, philosophies and religions, such as the dying/rising saviour motif, the teachings of the Buddha,[1031] Philo's *Logos* figure, and as discussed earlier, the Jewish Old Testament. There is even much in the Jewish intertestamental literature that suggests that a Celestial Messiah would have been easy for early Christians to invent, or adopt![1032] Incredibly, while the self-styled experts on Jesus' historicity typically overlook the intertestamental literature as unimportant, the Biblical authors themselves would disagree. As but one example, 2 Timothy 3:16 says that all scripture is helpful, while that book seems to refer to apocryphal texts more than the canonical texts.[1033] Interestingly, mainstream scholars are certainly aware of the problems caused by this ignorance of what could be crucially important texts:

> Deprived of all scriptures between the Testaments, the common reader is left with the impression that somehow Christianity sprang self-generated like a divine entity, with no past, into its historical setting. Yet a reading of the texts between the Testaments shows how major eschatological themes of the New Testament - the appearance of the Son of Man, the imminence of the End, the apocalyptic vision in the Book of Revelation, the notion of salvation through the messiah - are all the preoccupation of intertestamental literature. [1034]

Surely this is fiction, deriving from fiction, deriving from fiction. Indeed, even some mainstream scholars are aware that certain Old Testament and intertestamental texts speak of "earthly and heavenly counterparts", wherein there is a "parallelism of action", and that such texts describe the battles of angels, whilst further discussing the "Son of Man" ("the heavenly counterpart of the faithful Jews"), and a righteous servant who suffers, dies, and becomes exalted.[1035] The heavenly Son

of Man is encountered in the canonical book of Daniel,[1036] and almost certainly is the equivalent of the heavenly/divine Man encountered in the canonical book of Ezekiel,[1037] as well as various Platonic, Jewish intertestamental, Gnostic, and Philonic texts. Probably not coincidently, Paul, who could be perceived as immune to all these Jewish and Pagan influences by only the most hopeful and naïve of scholars, introduces readers to the figure of Jesus Christ, who is not placed in a specific time and place, and who could very well be an allegorical figure, or one active in a realm 'outside of/above the Earth'.

Back to the idea of heavenly counterparts, Paul happens to associate his Jesus with his heavenly 'last Adam', who is almost certainly the Pagan/Jewish/Gnostic/Philonic 'divine Man/Logos', and specifically contrasts this figure with the earthly 'first Adam'.[1038] Ironically, this is done in a Pauline chapter usually invoked as proof of the Historical Jesus' existence. Perhaps it is only coincidental, but the heavenly sacrifice of Jesus also just so happens to act as a counterpart to the earthly animal sacrifices; it is also a rather convenient solution for Jews who have lost access to the Jewish Temple, which is where the sacrifices were offered. By now appealing to Jesus' supposed sacrifice, Jewish Christians had effectively undone the results of the 'botched' sacrifice of Abraham's son, Isaac, and no longer needed to sacrifice animals.[1039]

Returning to the evolution of the story, Paul's writings potentially echo some of Jesus' teachings, though they are not attributed to him. Early forms of *Q*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, or similar sayings documents containing little to no narrative, possibly follow Paul as precursors to the canonical Gospels, and begin to ascribe many of the teachings to Jesus. [1040] The Gospel of Mark then appears, with a proper narrative (though only of the latter portion of Jesus' life), and with many deeds and sayings attributed to Jesus, perhaps partly motivated by the wish for a literal saviour around the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the armies of Titus.

Matthew and Luke – literally and figuratively – flesh out the story even further, introducing fuller and contradictory accounts of Jesus' miraculous birth, whilst the later Gospel of John 'reminds' readers, from the very first verse, that Jesus "was God."[1041] Now the 'evolution' of

Jesus' divinity could be seen as working against this overall pattern. However, while, as evidenced by the 4 canonical gospels, Jesus apparently becomes more divine over time, our earliest sources (i.e. Paul) are already aware of Jesus' divinity. As for Mark's 'more human' Jesus, this could well be an indication of Euhemerisation – though I see Mark as a meta-parable. Both could actually be taking place, with Mark presenting a euhemerised and allegorical parable to the masses, while he himself honours the Celestial Jesus, like his buddy/mentor, Paul.

After the Gospels, Church fathers then argue over various interpretations of Jesus' teachings, deeds, or even his form of existence, followed many centuries later by contemporary scholars who pretty much do the same. Modern, secular scholarship however, seems content to strip away the supernatural elements, leaving a somewhat mundane Jesus. [1042] Such historicist scholars are then followed by Jesus agnostics or mythicists who insist that even the more natural elements of the story can be stripped away until there is virtually nothing left. These sceptics promote a non-terrestrial view of Jesus, arguably as Paul or other early Christians had done, somewhat bringing Jesus' evolution full-circle. That this hypothesis fits the evidence so perfectly is frankly astonishing, and this eliminates the need for complex conspiracies or *direct* evidence – which is actually lacking in both theories.

If we were honest, we would all admit that we lack direct evidence. Christians need to rely on secondary accounts, despite, in their view, Jesus being the most amazing person of all time. Secular historicists lack early sources that portray Jesus in a purely mundane manner. Among the mythicists, Acharya S and her followers lack direct evidence of the Christian authors being astrologers, Atwill lacks direct evidence of his grand conspiracy theories, and Doherty and those he influenced lack (well, a lot of) direct evidence of the earliest Christians believing in a purely Celestial Jesus. Regarding the latter, I am being very generous to the historicist here. If minimal mythicism were true, then the writings of Paul, James, Clement, and so forth, *do constitute direct evidence*. Contrast this with historicity, which, even if true, is not supported by direct evidence. We simply don't have very early texts that portray a mundane Jesus. In any case, it seems rather convenient to be an agnostic! But where

agnosticism is not enough, the indirect evidence can be used in probabilistic theorising. Of course, there is nothing improbable about the Gospel Jesus being wholly ‘allegorical’.

That post-Pauline Christians would allegorise Paul’s Christ and then misinterpret the allegories is completely natural and, particularly with the latter, not unexpected. I would add that the fact that the Gospels were written long after the events depicted (rather than, say, a year later, which would have people expressing disbelief) makes this even more likely. Of course, when it comes to religion, allegories, allegorical interpretations, and hidden meanings abound. Among the Pagans, we see how Plutarch allegorically interpreted tales of ancient Egyptian gods.[1043] Philo did likewise, for the Jewish myths.[1044] Paul, our earliest Christian author, was also quite explicit about his interpreting Old Testament stories allegorically.[1045] He also seems to criticise believers who, likely by reading too literally, are missing the truths buried within the scriptures. [1046] According to Jesus, in a passage that makes him look far from forgiving and loving:

> The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”[1047]

That quotation comes from Mark, who we earlier suspected of constructing his entire Gospel as a meta-parable. We might also recall the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel commenting about ‘new scriptural treasures’; itself enshrined in a parable![1048] Church Father Origen certainly didn’t shy away from allegorical interpretations.[1049]

In light of all this, why think it impossible that Mark is allegorising Paul’s writings, and that later Christians – possibly including the later Gospel authors – would be prone to misinterpretation? With so many missing the point, is it really a stretch to think that was meant to convey some mystical truth became confused for historical fact? It is all too easy to do, especially when hampered by a lack of education, guidance, leadership, and also the inherent ambiguity of the sacred texts and/or their languages. In fact, while Paul was already complaining back then about

people misinterpreting the scriptures, believers to this day battle over which passages are literal, and which are mythical or allegorical.

Moving on, as we saw with my comments on the Gospels, both secular historicists and mythicists think that the story of Jesus had evolved. Neither the mythicist nor the historicist has direct evidence for their view; only indirect evidence, through later texts. That the Celestial Jesus evolved into the Gospel Jesus explains all this evidence. The same cannot be said for the Historical Jesus. It is unthinkable that Paul and other early writers know virtually nothing about him, and that we only get some insight into the Historical Jesus' life through the fictional Gospels, which tell another story. This all brings to mind some major issues regarding 'the Gospel Jesus', 'the Historical Jesus', and 'the Celestial Jesus'. The Gospel Jesus is a virtual impossibility, partly as it is unthinkable that such an important and famous person (he did come back to life, walk on water, heal people, and so forth) would not yield a single primary source.

For this person, the most important of all time, we should expect an abundance of contemporary evidence, and more non-contemporary evidence, not necessarily limited to documents. The author of John's gospel even says that Jesus did so many great things, that the world couldn't fit in all the books required to document them all.[1050] And yet, we have only these 4 crappy, anonymous, and interdependent Gospels, long after the 'fact'. The evidence is so woeful that I might even look favourably upon a *Christian* contemporary source, as surely a non-believer would become a believer upon witnessing the amazing miracles associated with Jesus. This complete lack of contemporary evidence obviously leaves conservative Christians, and potentially secular historicists, with an insurmountable problem.

Of course, for the latter, the Historical Jesus comes to the rescue. According to historicists, the Historical Jesus is poorly attested in the historical record because he was a very insignificant figure. Fair enough. But this is a cannibalistic theory, which causes a multitude of problems, particularly with the post-mortem 'success' of this very insignificant figure. It is odd that, while numerous other failed messiahs, healers, exorcists, and so forth, of the era, some of whom were also called 'Jesus',

and made a larger dent in the historical record, it is our very insignificant Jesus, apparently unknown during his lifetime, that happened to be seen as the Messiah, and divine, and thus kick-started a major religion. Even the historicist par excellence, Bart Ehrman, seems to acknowledge how strange it is that this "lower-class peasant" was seen as the Messiah when Jews generally expected someone "high and mighty, a figure of grandeur and power".[1051]

Consider also that we know of the likes of John the Baptist and other similar figures through external accounts; we know Jesus only through the claims of his followers. An insignificant Jesus seems a strange choice to become the spiritual solution that didn't need an earthly embodiment in the first place. Note that Christ of Faith proponents don't suffer from this insignificance issue, unlike secular historicists. The latter suffer because of the earlier discussed 'bracketing'. They have taken a fictional story about a very significant and important figure, removed the most unpalatable portions, and are left with something that is very problematic, something that doesn't make sense anymore. Ironically, the conservative scholars are right after all; the story does make more sense when the most implausible elements are restored to the story! Of course, we atheists reject the story as a whole, for numerous other reasons.

Now it seems counter-intuitive that after this apparent nobody's ultimate failure, his death, he went on to become deified, and the most cherished person of all time – 'tis truly a miracle! As noted earlier, historicists often like to see their own pattern, that Jesus becomes progressively more divine, starting with a fairly human Jesus in Mark's gospel. That is contradicted by the sources, where hints of Jesus' divinity are to be found in all the Canonical Gospels and also – more importantly – by our earliest Christian author, who clearly saw Jesus as a pre-existent divine being (whatever one thinks about Paul's possibly believing in a purely Celestial Jesus who was not incarnated on Earth).[1052] Even Ehrman now accepts that some of the earliest Christians thought of Jesus as a pre-existent divine being, and that many scholars have caught on. [1053] Any attempt to say that the Jesus of Paul and/or other early Christians was not God can be overlooked as irrelevant.

Ehrman is guilty of this, pointlessly claiming that Jesus' "earliest followers did not think he was God".[1054] He even appeals to Philippians 2:6-11 for support, though he admits that scholars dispute what it actually means, and despite the fact that many mythicists actually use this passage to argue *for* the Celestial Jesus, partly because it might indicate that Jesus was named after his death, which greatly contradicts the traditional view. [1055] Ehrman goes on to say that this passage, which he thinks predates Paul, could indicate that Jesus is here seen as a "preexisting angelic being", which is exactly what mythicists suspect, and further cites a scholarly source concerning Jewish beliefs about angels being "exalted to the level of God". Of course, he prefers an alternative interpretation that this occurred on Earth, though the passage does *not* say this. It is astounding that he so misunderstands the mythicist case, and fails to connect the dots. And unfortunately, Ehrman's 'logic' is essentially that Jesus can't be a dying and rising god because he is at best a dying and rising angel and at worst a dying and rising messiah.

Do Biblical scholars even listen to themselves? Ehrman then says that this early passage, from an imaginary source that apparently predates Paul's *earlier* (existing) writings, does predate the *later* (existing) Gospels, but doesn't predate their imaginary foundational sources.[1056] Partial credit for creativity! And this is just because he doesn't like it – he has no evidence for any of this, of course. Once again, he is pitting imaginary sources against each other, and happens to prefer the non-existing sources that confirm his views. Miraculously, it is the imaginary sources behind the *later* documents that take preference over the imaginary sources behind the *earlier* documents. It would be a false dichotomy to argue for either an early low (human) or high (God) Christology. There is at least one more option, the purely angel or angelomorphic Christology favoured by many mythicists, and indicated by the Philippians hymn. Celestial Jesus proponents don't need Jesus to be the top dog; an important divine/celestial/angelic being will do.

I also disagree with historicists when they find it so reasonable to imagine that cognitive dissonance led to Jesus' followers imagining his resurrection, when this did not occur with the many other Jesus-like figures, who happen to be better attested in history. It is surely possible,

and everything seems unlikely until it finally happens, but this could indicate that Jesus was more significant after all (wink, wink). As per my earlier comments on inconsistency, conservatives may be cheering my attacking of what is supposed to be the reasonable 'middle ground'. Without yet considering the Celestial Jesus theory, the problem of the Historical Jesus' insignificance *almost* leads me to say that the Gospel view of Jesus is correct. I wouldn't go that far, however, as no matter how unlikely the Historical Jesus is, the Gospel Jesus is even more unlikely. For instance, the latter entails the supernatural, suffers from the lack of contemporary evidence, and is held back by the bizarre fact that the earliest Christians seem not to know anything about this Jesus' earthly career, so that we can only know things about him from highly mythicised documents, that came along later.

To recap, the evidence is not sufficient for the Gospel-based Christ of Faith, but is far too much for an insignificant Jewish peasant. Thankfully, there is a third horn for this seeming 'dilemma'.

As you might by now expect, both sets of problems are solved by the theory of the Celestial Jesus, which has no obvious disadvantages. Jesus was seen as significant later on, because *he was always significant* – he was not some relatively poorly attested dime a dozen preacher. He was seen as divine later on, because *he was always divine*. The Gospel Jesus proponents think so as well, but have to face the poor record left by their Christ of Faith. Whilst the Gospel Jesus is better attested than the Historical Jesus (i.e. the relatively late Gospels vs. absolutely nothing), the lack of contemporary evidence is unforgivable. The Celestial Jesus solves this problem as well.

While we would expect many contemporary historical records of the Gospel Jesus, and possibly *some* contemporary record of the Historical Jesus, we have little reason to expect contemporary evidence for a Celestial Jesus that died up in some mysterious realm, and whose somewhat secretive believers only knew about all this through personal revelations and scriptural exegesis. To clarify, and to draw attention to an important distinction between the various stakeholders, the likes of

Doherty, Carrier, and myself, uphold the Celestial Jesus theory, but we do not believe that the Celestial Jesus existed.[1057]

To us secularists, a purely Celestial Jesus is a non-existing Jesus. So you might feel tempted to go ahead and replace my earlier 'little reason' with the more definite 'no reason'. We should expect zero evidence that the Celestial Jesus existed, simply because the Celestial Jesus didn't exist. If this seems confusing, just remember that we are on the 'Jesus probably didn't exist' bandwagon. The Celestial Jesus theory allows us to say this, because it entails that Christianity started with a figure that was made up. When we speak about non-existing figures, we generally don't expect any strong evidence for their existence. Admittedly, this point is fairly unconvincing, as when we are dealing with this sort of historical research, evidence for a person's existence and evidence for the belief in a person's existence virtually equate to the same thing.[1058] Indeed, this is partly what enables us to be sceptical about historical claims of a person's existence or supernatural events in the first place. We have evidence of the belief in *x*, not *x* itself.

Now what we *might* expect is some early evidence that people believed in the Celestial Jesus. However, even this may be still be asking too much. Given that the followers of the Gospel Jesus became the dominant faction within Christianity, our expectation for convincing evidence of the belief in the Celestial Jesus reduces dramatically, particularly when such believers were apparently so secretive. Nevertheless, if our Celestial Jesus theory is correct, then we actually do have evidence for the belief in the Celestial Jesus (the witness of Paul, et al), and, given the early Christians' referring to this happening "now" and claims of spiritual communications, particularly in writings that predate the Gospels, we arguably do have *contemporary* evidence. So it just so happens, that from the three major theories, the Celestial Jesus theory best explains the evidence, and is by far the best attested by the evidence.

Let us also consider that a non-existing Jesus was an advantage for believers, even when a more historicised sect became dominant, as nobody could have pointed to historical accounts that contradicted them – there simply were no genuine historical accounts about Jesus. Furthermore, if

Christian origins had more to do with mysterious mystery religions and/or elitist Gnosticisms than mainstream historicists would care to admit, then a poor historical record is very much expected. The Celestial Jesus theory just fits, and we historians are not at liberty to declare this as mere coincidence. If this seems too bizarre a theory for Christian origins, I can only recommend some research into the Jewish intertestamental literature.

In the vast mounds of Jewish non-canonical writings penned down before the Christian era, we find people diligently searching the scriptures for new/current truths, the belief in spiritual beings who fight throughout otherworldly realms, claims of celestial beings interacting with Earthlings (sometimes via visions), apocalyptic warnings and the hope for a new world, assurances of salvation and immortality, miraculous claims, passion narratives, stories of resurrections, and figures given monikers such as Son of God, Son of Man, King of Kings, Messiah, and Prince of Peace. For example, Enoch is said to have become the redemptive, messianic, and celestial Son of Man who 'all' shall follow, and had a sort of death/resurrection experience while in an upper realm.[1059] Sounds a little like the Christian Son of Man, the Celestial Jesus who we are supposed to follow, who died and was resurrected for our benefit, in an upper realm. Just a little. See how we don't have to rely on hypothetical sources? We already have everything we need.

There is clearly much fodder therein that can naturally and easily explain the thoughts of Paul and the Gospel authors. Even mainstream secular and Christian Biblical scholars are coming around to the idea that such documents, like 1 Enoch (and its celestial and messianic Son of Man) influenced New Testament writers.[1060] Interestingly, finding Jesus in the Jewish pre-Christian literature may not be so offensive to Christians. After all, they generally expect to see such things, with Jesus fulfilling earlier Jewish prophecies. Secular historicists on the other hand, who obviously can't accept genuinely fulfilled prophecies, would essentially be forced to adopt agnostic/mythicist views. Perhaps a little more support for my contention that this is truly a debate among atheists.

Of course, there is no need to appeal to authentic historical sources about Jesus, which Paul didn't seem bothered about anyway, and which the

Gospel authors didn't care to name. Or preserve. Paul's indifference towards the Gospels and historical information about an Earthly Jesus is so strangely conspicuous, that if we were to hypothetically rule out much of the shared information between his writings and the later Gospels as being superficially manufactured by the authors of the latter, it would seem that Paul's writings have much more in common with certain Jewish intertestamental texts than with the Christian Gospels!

It is also worth noting that such intertestamental literature plays a role in a very similar hypothesis to Doherty's Celestial Jesus theory, and perhaps one of its key influences: G. A. Wells' idea that the Gospel Jesus was a reimagined version of Paul's Christ, who was based on the mythical and Jewish 'Wisdom' figure. References to the Wisdom or the Wisdom of God can be found in the Old Testament, in Paul's New Testament writings (including the 'archons passage'), the pseudo-Pauline Colossians, and the intertestamental *Wisdom of Solomon*, which portrays the figure as suffering. Ehrman has a bit to say about this possibility.[1061] He is unimpressed that Colossians is not genuinely Pauline, but I think that that aids the case, since it would mean that Paul is not alone in thinking such things. Ehrman even admits that Paul knew/thought about it, so it certainly should be possible that Paul was influenced by the Jewish Wisdom concept.

Ehrman also notes that the *Wisdom of Solomon* is non-canonical, as if that is relevant, particularly to an atheist who shouldn't be upholding any sacred text as veridical. In other words, we should not be privileging the canonical texts. Going by his earlier work, Ehrman knows full well that many noncanonical texts were cherished by numerous Jews and Christians:

> Moreover, the victors in the struggles to establish Christian Orthodoxy not only won their theological battles, they also rewrote the history of the conflict; later readers then naturally assumed that the victorious views had been embraced by the vast majority of Christians from the very beginning… The practice of Christian forgery has a long and distinguished history… the debates lasted over three hundred years… even within "orthodox" circles there was considerable debate concerning which books to include. [1062]

This quotation also supports my explanation for why more (quantitatively and qualitatively) explicit Celestial Jesus or Wisdom Jesus passages did not survive. Ehrman ends, incredibly, by admitting that Christians may indeed have thought of Jesus as God's Wisdom, but asserts, with no evidence, and possibly going against the evidence, that this was not the belief of the earliest Christians or Paul.[1063]

Anyhow, the intertestamental literature oft seems bizarre but coincidentally finds similarities with the earliest Christian documents. We objective scholars and historians do not just simply brush this off; we think probabilistically. All this indicates that many mythicists may have been right all along. Not only is the Celestial Jesus theory possible, and plausible, it seems like it could be very probable. After all, the increasing amount of purportedly historical material over time certainly favours the 'mythical to historical' trajectory. Consider also that 'clues' regarding a Celestial Jesus found in texts that generally posit an earthly Gospel Jesus heavily suggests that the Celestial Jesus came first. Given that it were (and still are) the supporters of the earthly Gospel Jesus that collected, preserved, and edited the biblical texts, for many centuries, it is obviously more probable that such Celestial Jesus 'clues' were original remnants that slipped through, rather than later additions.[1064] Of course, it certainly wouldn't be the first time that a religion, myth, or movement originated with an entirely fictional founder.

Fictitious Founders

Even when overlooking numerous obvious examples from non-Abrahamic (!) religions,[1065] that a movement could revolve around a mystical, fictitious, or legendary, figure that was later historicised is not without precedent: such theories exist on King Arthur, who has been likened to the Gaelic Fionn – originally a mythical god, later historicised – and of whom historians cannot assume historicity "simply because a medieval source claims that this is the case".[1066] In a recent article comparing Jesus and the figure of Ned Ludd, historian of religion Arthur Droge asserts: "To start a religion, all you need is a *name*."[1067] To

further his point, Droge refers to outspoken anti-religionist, Christopher Hitchens:

> Yet again it is demonstrated that monotheistic religion is a plagiarism of a plagiarism of a hearsay of a hearsay, of an illusion of an illusion, extending all the way back to a fabrication of a few non-events.[1068]

Droge argues that religions need not have an 'originating moment' and that the historical movement of Luddism "was not generated by the dramatic actions of any one individual", but by the creation and appropriation of an eponym: in this case, the "perhaps apocryphal" Ned Ludd. Droge explores the varying groups (by geographical region and by labour sector) of the technophobic Luddites, who each sought to adapt the figure of Ned Ludd to suit their needs. Droge then speculates if such "polygenesis" could also apply to the origins of Christianity. Like the early Christians, the Luddites produced poems, manifestoes, and anonymous writings. Droge draws attention to modern 'neo-Luddites' who engage in "mythmaking, in the construction of genealogies and the invention of histories", drawing parallels with modern historical Jesus scholars who impose their own views on their version of the 'historical Jesus' and who "are not *really* talking about Jesus at all". Droge finally calls on scholars to acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth was "probably apocryphal", and to focus on "matters much more interesting and important when it comes to the invention of Christianity".[1069]

A somewhat similar situation arises with the case of alleged mass-murderer and cannibal Sawney Bean. Like Jesus, Mr Bean was claimed to have a family, was involved with other historical figures, was considered significant enough that people wrote about him, and the locations of his greatest triumphs are 'known'. As with Jesus, the claims about Bean are made after the fact, with no contemporary documents attesting to his existence. Furthermore, Bean's story appears to derive from the stories of earlier figures. Notably, Sawney Bean's historical existence is questioned, and typically doubted.[1070] We may wonder why a non-cannibalistic version of Sawney Bean is not vociferously argued for.

We may also wonder why the historical existence of more mundane figures like Ludd and Bean (to say nothing of the not so mundane figures

of many religions and mythologies) is questioned by historians, while the existence of Jesus – whose sources are evangelistic and contain numerous implausible claims – should be taken as a certainty. Given that the historical existence of important Jewish figures like Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has become increasingly questioned of late, I suspect that it is only a matter of time before questioning Jesus' historicity becomes more mainstream.

The Revelation of/from Paul

Had there been an Earthly and historical Jesus, Paul's writings, despite only being secondary sources, would be expected to portray him in a more historical manner (with reliable and trustworthy sources named), and there might have been fewer – often violent – disagreements in the early days of the Church, and the Historical Jesus scholarship of modern times. Interestingly, there were early Christians who had alternative views on Jesus' fleshly existence. There are also numerous passages within the Pauline and other Epistles that portray a Jesus that is very different from the Gospels' image. A Jesus is depicted, who need not necessarily have been on Earth, at a certain point in history. Interestingly, if Paul did believe in a purely Celestial Jesus, then his writings become elevated to primary sources. Mythicists, then, have a far better standard of evidence to call on, than their secular historicist and conservative counterparts.

The example of the Luddites also demonstrates how a movement/s and writings can spring forth from (or be retrospectively associated with) a character that scholars have no good reason to assume existed historically, and how a movement can have numerous 'origins'. It is simply not necessary that there was a Historical Jesus behind the origins of Christianity and the writings of the early Christians. Considering this, and the clear evolution of the story among the relevant texts, there is ample reason to doubt that there was a historical Jesus at all. As Droge realised, "To start a religion, all you need is a *name*."[1071]

Conclusion

Questioning Jesus' historicity is a reasonable and worthwhile scholarly exercise, and is increasingly afforded scholarly credibility. While the Biblical Jesus is generally dismissed by secular scholars (the principle of analogy alone justifies this), the Historical Jesus, a distilled version of the Biblical Jesus, is generally taken to have existed. However, the methods used to construct this Historical Jesus (or rather, these Historical Jesuses) are bankrupt, particularly the dreaded appeal to imaginary sources, and have little to do – application-wise, at least – with mainstream historical research. The sources used fare no better. Apart from the problematic lack of contemporary and eyewitness sources, none of the extant sources are beyond scrutiny; each one presented a cavalcade of problems that raise serious questions over their accuracy and reliability.

Intriguingly, the Gospels cannot even be considered as relatively good evidence for the Historical Jesus, partly as they are exactly the sort of documents we would expect, whether Jesus was a historical person that became mythicised, or a completely mythical person that became historicised. Inevitably, and unfortunately, the case for Jesus' historical existence then rests on the Epistles, primarily those of Paul. Paul's silence over the Historical Jesus seems to be an insurmountable problem, likewise his reliance on divine knowledge, rather than eyewitness accounts. Of course, none of that rules out the possibility that there was a historical Jesus; no matter how many issues are found, Jesus' historical existence will always be possible, even if a hypothetical Pauline letter dated from 35 CE proclaimed the Jesus story a fiction. But is it probable?

Furthermore, numerous hints throughout Paul's (and others') early Christian writings indicate that it is not a recent and earthly Jesus that is being discussed, but a purely celestial one. And the theory of the Celestial Jesus seems to perfectly fit the development of the sources, and coheres well with the beliefs of pre-Christian Jews, whilst also solving key problems with typical Biblical Jesus and Historical Jesus hypotheses. Even

if Paul truly did believe in an Earthly Jesus, his writings, like the Gospels, are very much questionable, so that agnosticism is a reasonable option. Until some convincing piece of evidence about a historical or mythical Jesus (or the beliefs of the earliest Christians) is found in future, it may well be that the most rational position on Jesus' historicity would be a total rejection of the Biblical Jesus, and the adoption of an agnostic-type position on the more mundane Historical Jesus.

With the non-Christian sources being late, derivative, and either forged or misattributed/ambiguous, we can only rely on Christian sources. Our sources for Jesus were written by Christians, edited by Christians, and selectively preserved by Christians. This certainly gives us reason to express our reservations about the existence of the Historical Jesus. Maybe there was such a Jesus, maybe there was not. In the absence of convincing evidence, it is possible, but not necessarily probable, and certainly not certain. We have to at least accept that Jesus' non-existence is an epistemic possibility, and one that isn't necessarily small.

This has massive implications for scholarship. The question of Jesus' very existence should be considered more seriously by academics, rather than simply being assumed with focus moving to which deeds or sayings of Jesus can be authenticated; no doubt a pointless exercise if there was no Historical Jesus. Many methods used by Biblical scholars clearly are in need of revision. In considering Avalos' indictment of the irrelevance of much of Biblical studies (such as his humorous reference to a journal article that admits that it "*has nothing new to tell us*"), Biblical scholars might even wish to focus their attention on solving worthwhile "problems" and other work that could benefit the scholarly community, and humanity in general.[1072]

The personnel of Religious Studies departments are generally well aware that orthopraxy, correct practice, is often far more relevant to religious adherents than orthodoxy, correct beliefs. Just as the Daoist need not exalt Laozi, or the Buddhist believe in the Buddha, the Christian's religion need not be grounded in a literal Christ, or even an Earthly and historical Jesus. We who understand that religion is often about far more than 'the facts' could appreciate it somewhat if the focus of research on

Jesus moves from unnecessarily and unsuccessfully ‘authenticating’ various sayings and deeds to the intended messages of the teachings, whether they stem from a historical Jesus or not.[1073]

Note also that many components of various Jesus ahistoricity theories are agreed upon by mythicists and Jesus historicists alike. These include elements such as the lack of primary sources, the limited value of the non-biblical sources, the general unreliability of the Gospels, the minimalistic Jesus of the Epistles, Jesus’ parallels with earlier mythical figures, the existence of pre-Christian Jewish beliefs in a Celestial Christ, the allusions to a Celestial Christ in Paul’s writings, and the notion that the first Gospel allegorises Paul’s writings. This should have us questioning whether the ahistoricists are so ‘fringe’ after all. It is in the over-arching conclusions where we differ, with the more sceptical perhaps having the courage to put their credibility and careers on the line in ‘connecting the dots’.

That the Historical Jesus could possibly have existed is not up for debate. That is true of all figures, mythical or historical, whether there are surviving sources mentioning them or not – and even if there are sources explicitly denying their existence. Nevertheless, given the lack of primary source evidence, the many issues with the extra-Biblical sources, the reliance on spurious secondary sources, and questions over the genre, intent, and veridicality of the Gospel accounts, it would seem that considerable doubt as to Jesus’ historicity is easily justified. There is quite clearly a multitude of good reasons to doubt the existence of the Historical Jesus. We should all, at the very least, be Historical Jesus agnostics.

When we stop pretending that the Gospels were even intended to be objective biographies; when we stop pretending that the gospel authors were eyewitnesses and/or reliable and qualified historians; when we stop pretending that the main sources are not theological in nature; when we stop pretending that these and later sources weren’t tampered with and weren’t carefully selected and preserved by orthodox Christians of a certain type; when we stop pretending that there are not alternative readings possible in Paul; and when we stop pretending that we can learn so much about Jesus from imaginary sources, where does that leave us

with our investigating Jesus' historicity?[1074] It should leave us with agnosticism. We simply don't know that Jesus existed. We should not base our viewpoint on what we'd like to be true but on what we can reasonably conclude from the evidence. If the evidence is not good enough to conclude, either way, then so be it. We ought to be agnostic.

Of course, a case for agnosticism on the matter could attract the ire of historicists and mythicists alike. To the historicist, questioning Jesus' existence is oft considered to be amateurish and hyper-sceptical. To the mythicist, 'merely' questioning Jesus' existence may be considered lazy and concessionary. I personally find that attitude quite strange, given that the move towards agnosticism would be a major step forward, both for secular scholars, and for lay atheists.[1075] In any case, agnosticism seems a sober and balanced view, given the lack of decisive evidence, for both sets of theories. While it is my preferred and official position, the rational case against Jesus' historicity need not actually stop at agnosticism.

Like John the Baptist anticipating Jesus, the Historical Jesus agnostic predicts that an even greater case can be made. While what we do not have access to implies that we will never conclusively resolve the question, there is a way to derive the most preferable answer, from what we do have access to. The argument from silence can thus be upgraded to an argument to the best explanation.

> But after me comes one who is more powerful than I…[1076]

4. THE CASE FOR MYTHICISM: CARRIER

Introduction

As we have seen, there are numerous reasons to be doubtful about Jesus' historical existence. But can Jesus' non-existence actually be reasonably argued? And what's the best way to go about it? There are many theories espousing Jesus mythicism, the position that the Historical Jesus is just as much a fiction as the Christ of Faith. Just as with the scholars who purport Jesus' historicity, Jesus mythicists tend to explain their theory, point to some evidence that seemingly confirms it, and deal with some objections. None of this should cause an objective observer to conclude that this particularly theory about Jesus is the most reasonable one. What is required is a thorough analysis, whereby such theories are compared to each other, and to the evidence, probabilistically, so that the most reasonable theory can finally be identified.

While my agnosticism over Jesus' historicity seems entirely justified due to the nature of the sources alone, there is one plausible alternative theory for Christian origins that asserts that Jesus did not exist. This theory has now thoroughly been argued for as *probable*, by Richard Carrier. While such alternative theories are usually poorly-argued, Richard Carrier's case for outright mythicism lays out a clear and transparent historical method – revolving around the earlier discussed Bayes' Theorem – whilst also methodically incorporating much relevant background knowledge that many mainstream scholars would be largely ignorant of. The most significant aspect of Carrier's recent book, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, since much of his source-criticism is already in the mainstream, is that he seems to be the first to examine the issue of Jesus' historicity by incorporating a direct and probabilistic (and also logically exhaustive) comparative analysis of the plausible hypotheses. He is not simply the first mythicist to do so; he is the first Biblical historian, period. You shall find nothing similar even in the works of reputed mainstream historicists like Ehrman, Crossan, and van Voorst.

It is for this reason that Carrier is held up as my exemplar for a case that is positively for Jesus' ahistoricity. It is for this reason that, while

methodological disagreements would automatically prevent me from associating with many other mythicists, Carrier's work takes centre stage here, rather than the work of people like Earl Doherty, David Fitzgerald, Robert Price and Acharya S. It is Earl Doherty's theory (itself based on the work of others) that Carrier actually argues for, and Robert Price has served the 'field' well by providing it with rare scholarly support. The likes of David Fitzgerald and Acharya S have also done much to popularise this stream of thought, and the latter, in fact, introduced me to this intuitively 'crazy idea'. So no offence is intended to these, and others who shall generally go unmentioned. Carrier's work here simply far surpasses anything before it – high (and counter-intuitive) praise from someone who also publishes on the topic.

Unfortunately, one particular mythicist 'rival' of Carrier's feels quite passionately about the supposedly undue attention Carrier receives, and somehow found Carrier's argument 'shallow' before the book was even published. For my part, I only focus on Carrier due to his direct comparative analysis of the major hypotheses. I invited the other scholar to do so, and assured them that I would critique theirs also, but was informed that they didn't have the time to do this. I find that amazing, as this is surely the most important aspect of the historicist-mythicist debate. Curiously, this figure feels that they can comment on Carrier's book without having read it, and tried to convince me that the historicity question itself is actually 'shallow', with associated issues being more deserving of attention.

Unless the vast majority of scholars, and perhaps laypeople, agree that Jesus probably didn't exist, I do not see how good scholarly research on the possibility of Jesus' ahistoricity could possibly be considered shallow. Indeed, I 'merely' argue for agnosticism on the matter, which, while less fringe, is still a minority position. On the flip side, whilst he can come off as brash, Carrier's objections to other mythicists' work revolve around what he deems to be methodological inadequacies. I can sympathise, becoming bemused, for example, when some mythicists try to argue for Jesus' ahistoricity by appealing to 'clues' in medieval paintings. Of course, as we have seen, the work of mainstream historicists is often not much better!

It is worth noting that I have no great inherent desire to promote Carrier or his work – he is certainly no friend of mine. Some of what he says and does is annoying, seemingly egotistical, and even offensive to me, and we are otherwise quite different. For example, I am generally far more positive towards religion and the religious, which admittedly may have something to do with our insider/outsider status regarding the academic world. I also find him quite brazen and harsh with his opinions on others, scholars in particular; for instance, his penchant for calling many of his scholarly critics "insane".[1077] Though I am the one with a Dutch background, I see in him the typical Dutch stereotype of someone who is arrogant and vocal – and annoyingly right. He enjoys the freedoms of an independent scholar, not beholden to scholarly courtesies, and he clearly delights in exercising those freedoms. Carrier is also what the typical Christian may expect an atheist to be. A person who drinks freely, cheats on his wife, seemingly enjoys getting in people's faces, and indulges in many (to them) questionable sexual practices.[1078]

By contrast, I am significantly more 'wholesome', and, well, 'Christian'. Not to brag (is it even worth bragging about?), but I often seem more Christian than many Christians. I abstain from alcohol, and have always been faithful to my life partners. My more 'boring' life is no doubt influenced by my Christian upbringing, right down to my Protestant work ethic, and I do not claim it to be appropriate for all. (As an aside, for those non-Christians that are a little put off by my clean image, I genuinely think that this is one of my many attributes that makes me even more 'dangerous' to Christian evidentialists. I am 'moral', pro-religious, have numerously opened up my heart to Jesus, and would be quite happy for God to exist and for Christianity to be exclusively true. It is strictly the lack of evidence that prevents this.) Though I obviously would not endorse his lifestyle, I do applaud Carrier for his integrity, consistency, and his honesty, particularly when the latter provides his critics with more fuel for their irrelevant arguments. Furthermore, plenty of religious believers, including Christians, indulge in such behaviour.

Nevertheless, apart from his frankness, none of this is truly relevant. The man is a rigorous logician and undertakes interesting and important

research. I do not need to judge how he lives his life; nor do I wish to poison the well, especially since I am upholding him as the exemplar for the mythicist position. I only wish to highlight that our relationship is strictly professional. We are bound by the same dedication to truth, logic, and sound methodologies. My perhaps begrudging and effectual promotion then, of a self-employed (he can certainly do nothing to further my academic career, and perhaps the association is even harmful to me) and 'unfriendly rival' who apparently thinks very little of my work, and perhaps my status as an 'insider' of the scholarly world (unlike Carrier and most mythicists, I teach at a world-class university), should speak volumes about how thorough and significant Carrier's comparative analysis is.[1079]

I could go on about my dislike for Carrier, but it is simply irrelevant, even if he is the most disagreeable person on the planet. Simply, I respect his methods, and I respect his arguments. I empathise with his forgoing of a greater income for the greater good, and, given that he previously was a historicist, I also respect his willingness to change his mind, when the evidence necessitates it. In addition, keep in mind how I thoroughly respect Bart Ehrman, and enjoy much of his work, though I am unrelentingly and unapologetically savage in my criticisms over his thoroughly illogical 'research' on Jesus' historicity. This is scholarship, and scholarship is about the truth; 'like' has nothing to do with it.

As with many historians, analytic philosophers, and Religious Studies scholars before him (Christians and atheists alike), Carrier advocates a Bayesian approach, which has led to this sound and transparent case – one that is unprecedented in the field. Now reading what follows is of course not the equivalent of reading *On the Historicity of Jesus* directly, but meets the needs of those who find it too long, too technical, and perhaps too pricey, and also provides a critique from a suitably qualified and similarly uncommitted scholar. I mean the latter in regards to my attitudes and opinions concerning Jesus, and Richard Carrier. Not only would I be happy for there to have been a Historical Jesus, but my agnostic position does not *rely* on Carrier's work; it is 'merely' *strengthened* by it.

This chapter is not some mere summary of Carrier's case, with a little bit of commentary added. It is a reinterpretation and simplification of a thorough and complex body of work (that spans over 600 pages and a prequel book); one that has been authorised and refined by its original author, who took the opportunity to clarify and correct. Keeping lay audiences in mind, as well as scholars of external fields, I simplify much of the technical language, numbers, and mathematical calculations, to the extent that the latter is even unnecessary. I also offer alternative figures to Carrier's, eventually revealing that a slightly different – and much simpler – approach, one that generally favours historicity, still yields the counter-intuitive results that justify the more sceptical work of Carrier, myself, and other Jesus sceptics.

Chapter 1: The Problem

Carrier's well-organised tome is prefaced with the claim that mainstream scholars need to take the mythicist theory seriously, and certainly need to argue better against it.[1080] Given what we have seen so far, the latter is exceedingly obvious. Like myself, Carrier previously accepted the historicity of Jesus, and alleges that he still has no personal desire in rejecting the figure of the Historical Jesus.[1081] Having earlier criticised many of the methods used by historicist scholars, and argued for the uses of Bayes' Theorem, in his book, *Proving History*, Carrier dedicates the first chapter proper to 'the problem'. Recognising that anyone can promote any oddball theory, which is how he initially viewed Jesus mythicism, the theory presented by Earl Doherty – that Jesus was originally considered to be a celestial figure, which became increasingly-historicised over time – proved somewhat convincing.[1082]

Inspired, though not necessarily convinced, and noting the great disagreements among both Jesus historicists and Jesus mythicists, Carrier decided to use a Bayesian approach to directly compare a minimal theory of historicity with a minimal theory of mythicism.[1083] This makes the analysis far simpler (and achievable), and also unburdens Jesus mythicism from the many wildly implausible theories that eager amateurs have concocted. Noting that many Jesus mythicists seem 'crazy' and amateurish, Carrier notes that the proposal of mythicism, that 'biographical facts' about completely fictional characters would eventuate, is not crazy in itself.[1084] After all, that "eventually the truth of what the story symbolized was confused with the truth of the story itself", is easily observed with examples such as King Arthur, Ned Ludd, and John Frum.[1085]

That there are no historical figures behind the Old Testament portrayals of Moses and Abraham is also becoming increasingly accepted. One motivation for transforming a mythical character into a historical one is obvious: authority. There is no good reason, then, to deny that such a thing may have happened in the case of Jesus. Since there are a multitude

of theories about Jesus, most or even all of which are wrong, Carrier accuses both camps of erring, in allowing so many unjustified theories to endure, stressing that "both houses" have much work to do.[1086] He acknowledges that what he presents is not a comprehensive survey of all the theories and all of the evidence,[1087] but it does not have to be (and that is practically impossible). It would be sufficient for Carrier to 'merely' compare the basic theories of historicity and mythicism, with the most relevant evidence.

Interestingly, Carrier indicates that he will argue *a fortiori*. He will preference the Jesus historicity theory with his probability estimates wherever he can, which should make his eventual case for mythicism even more convincing and justifiable.[1088]

Chapter 2: The Hypothesis of Historicity

As Christian apologists are often eager to point out, it is common for actual historical figures, such as former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, to become 'mythicised'. That is, to be elevated 'to the status of a god'.[1089] That a Historical Jesus did exist, and was later mythicised, primarily through the Gospels, is also possible, and this is precisely what mainstream specialist scholars presume. However, as I have earlier noted, direct and early sources for the Historical Jesus exist no longer, if they ever existed at all, unlike the case of Haile Selassie. What we have left to examine today are the obviously fictional accounts of the Christ of Faith or Biblical/Gospel Jesus. One bizarre historicist claim is that the sources for Jesus are better than for other noteworthy historical figures (such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar), which is plainly false. As I did with Caesar, Carrier demonstrates the numerous primary, critical, and qualified sources that exist for the likes of Alexander.[1090] There are simply no such sources for Jesus.

With the focus necessarily turning to the positive and negative (reactive) arguments made by mainstream historicist scholars, Carrier explains that they tend to focus on refuting the worst of the mythicists' claims, and furthermore, use inadequate methods and approaches.[1091] The former is correct, as we have seen especially through Casey's attempt. The latter is also correct, as we have seen, with Carrier adding an interesting example: mainstream scholars tend to focus on 'new evidence', such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which typically says nothing relevant about a Historical Jesus.[1092] They also seem quite fond of 'forgetting' what they know of previous Biblical traditions.

For example, regarding the popular theory that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, Carrier reminds us that Daniel was also, though Old Testament scholars are generally content to declare the whole book of Daniel as a complete fiction.[1093] And while much is made of the supposedly earthly Jesus' prophecies and sayings, Carrier realises that the completely visionary Jesus of the book of Revelation also seems to teach

and prophesy.[1094] And as the question over Jesus' historicity is essentially a discussion among atheists, a purely revelatory or celestial Jesus is equivalent to a non-existent Jesus.

Moving on from a preliminary treatment of the evidence (the sources), to considering what theory best explains the evidence, Carrier agrees with my assertion that scholars tend to defend mere possibilities.[1095] This is surely not enough; where are the probabilistic analyses demonstrating a scholar's pet theory to be the most reasonable one? There is also the problem that a vast multiplicity of theories means that each theory could be considered as having a very small prior probability of being correct. This is exactly what Carrier aims to address, and he actually assists scholars on both sides of the debate by constructing just two very simple theories, to be used in a direct comparative analysis.

This is a practical and sound approach, as more complex theories tend to add unnecessary elements, which usually lowers the prior probability of the theory being true.[1096] While I earlier argued that crafting a more complex theory that better fits the evidence by incorporating unsupported (or even unlikely) premises results in the posterior (overall) probability being unmoved, as a lower prior probability is entailed, Carrier is more aggressive in asserting that the posterior probability would actually often be lowered.[1097] Carrier explains his reasoning for choosing two theories, by outlining four classes of possible theories.

Jesus was either a 'historical person mythicized', or a 'mythical person historicized', or a 'historical person not mythicized', or a 'mythical person not historicized'.[1098] The third option refers essentially to the Biblical Jesus, and is ruled out by any competent historian for obvious reasons, which need not be seriously discussed in a book whose subtitle is 'A Debate Among Atheists'. The fourth option is also dismissed, as Jesus has obviously been placed in a historical context: by the Gospels, by later Christians, and also by modern historicist scholars. Even mythicists agree to this. Indeed, if Jesus were not historicised, what would we even be discussing? Carrier is then left with 'bare historicism' (the first option) and 'bare mythicism' (the second option), which he seeks to develop enough so that they can make substantial predictions that can relate to the

evidence.[1099] Without the ability to make predictions, judgements cannot be made about how expected evidence is on a theory, which is crucial in a probabilistic analysis.

Due to the popularity of the name, Carrier supposes that there were likely several 'Jesuses' that were crucified under Pontius Pilate.[1100] But we are not interested in just any Jesus/Joshua, we are interested in the facts of the Jesus that supposedly inspired the Christian faith. Carrier rightly warns against being swayed by established 'facts' about Jesus, such as his alleged crucifixion, as they stem from unreliable sources and could easily apply to a non-historical version of Jesus.[1101] In any case, such facts are not necessary for there having to have been a historical person behind the Biblical Jesus; they are not necessary for the theory of minimal historicity. Carrier outlines, as simply as possible, a reasonable version of a minimal historicity theory:

1. An actual man at some point named Jesus acquired followers in life who continued as an identifiable movement after his death.
2. This is the same Jesus who was claimed by some of his followers to have been executed by the Jewish or Roman authorities.
3. This is the same Jesus some of whose followers soon began worshipping as a living god (or demigod).[1102]

With Carrier's case now underway, he has done nothing yet that should be objected to by the opposing historicists. Some may protest that his portrayal of minimal historicity is too basic, but that is the whole point. The simper it is, the less encumbered it is, and the more likely the theory is to be true – it includes a wider portion of the probability spectrum. The more specific the theory is, the less probable it becomes. True to his word about arguing *a fortiori*, Carrier is doing historicity a favour. There is surely something to be said about critiquing the strongest form of the opponent's theory. This is clearly not what the mainstream historicists have done.

Chapter 3: The Hypothesis of Myth

Carrier starts with a discussion of the 'Vision' part (chapters 6-11) of the early – and little-known – Christian text known as the *Ascension of Isaiah*. He excludes the 'pocket gospel' portion of this text, as it is not found in all of the remaining manuscripts (like just about all early Christian documents, it has been tampered with), and is likely a later addition.[1103] What's left seems to describe a journey taken by a spiritual Jesus. Carrier explains that here is a "preexistent divine being called Lord Christ", that descends "to the firmament", and is crucified by "the god of that world", Satan, and his angelic followers, "without knowing who he is".[1104] This spiritual Jesus descended to the firmament (above our world, Earth), died, rose from the dead, tarried for 'a year and a half' (Carrier notes the similarities here with Irenaeus' *Against All Heresies* 1.3.2), then went back to Heaven; there is no mention of any of this happening in Jerusalem.[1105] Though the text has been tampered with, probably to make it seem as if a more historical Jesus is being described (though none of this sounds historical at all!), we see that "Jesus Christ was being described as a preexistent divine being descending below the moon to be killed by sky demons in outer space".[1106]

This is essentially amateur Earl Doherty's core theory that Jesus was originally thought to have been a completely celestial figure, that communicated to his earthly followers through revelations.[1107] Carrier sees parallels with the much older (by at least 1,000 years) *Descent of Inanna* myth. Inanna, the Queen of Heaven, was a Sumerian goddess (and a child of a god) who descended from Heaven, was crucified by demons in a non-earthly realm, and rose three days later.[1108] Pre-Christian Jews certainly knew of the Inanna myth, as is indicated by Jeremiah 7:18, 44:15-26, and Ezekiel 8:14, so it would not be surprising if some of them adopted the story, and 'improved' it suit their own cultural and religious notions.[1109] The curious story portrayed in the *Ascension of Isaiah* also coheres well with the Apostle Paul's bizarre declaration in 1 Corinthians 2:8 that had they knew who Jesus really was, the "rulers of this world" would not have killed him.[1110] After all, if those that killed people were

humans on Earth, and they knew who Jesus really was, and what his death would accomplish (their salvation), they would have had even more reason to kill him!

Again re-iterating that Earl Doherty's mythicist theory is the best one (and also that so many mythicist theories are ridiculous),[1111] Carrier attempts to explain what it actually is, and as with the alternative theory, seeks to formulate a simple, broad, and defensible version of it. He notes that essentially all competent mythicists, while disagreeing over various details, hold that:

> Jesus was originally a god, just like any other god (properly speaking, a demigod in pagan terms; an archangel in Jewish terms; in either sense, a deity), who was later historicised, just as countless other gods were, and that the Gospel of Mark (or Mark's source) originated the Christian myth familiar to us by building up an edifying and symbolically meaningful tale for Jesus, drawing on passages from the Old Testament and popular literature, coupled with elements of revelation and pious inspiration. The manner in which Osiris came to be historicized, moving from being just a cosmic god to being given a whole narrative biography set in Egypt during a specific historical period, complete with collections of wisdom sayings he supposedly uttered, is still an apt model, if not by any means an exact one.[1112]

Carrier then distils this to what can be called 'minimal mythicism':

1. At the origin of Christianity, Jesus Christ was thought to be a celestial deity much like any other.
2. Like many other celestial deities, this Jesus 'communicated' with his subjects only through dreams, visions and other forms of divine inspiration (such as prophecy, past and present).
3. Like some other celestial deities, this Jesus was originally believed to have endured an ordeal of incarnation, death, burial and resurrection in a supernatural realm.
4. As for many other celestial deities, an allegorical story of this same Jesus was then composed and told within the sacred community, which placed him on earth, in history, as a divine man, with an earthly family, companions, and enemies, complete with deeds and sayings, and an earthly depiction of his ordeals.
5. Subsequent communities of worshipers believed (or at least taught) that this invented sacred story was real (and either not allegorical or only 'additionally' allegorical). [1113]

That this seems more complex (in terms of verbiage) than the opposing theory actually has no relevance in discussing its plausibility. We thus have one reasonable theory facing off against one other. Carrier notes that there are possibly other theories that entail Jesus' non-existence, but thinks them so implausible that minimal mythicism should properly represent all theories entailing Jesus' non-existence.[1114] I think that all this may further advantage the historicity hypothesis. This effectively gives us a clear path to the truth, or what should be considered true, given the available evidence. Supporting my assertion that this is truly a debate among atheists, the Gospel Jesus has been left at the door. There are only two viable options, and – with Carrier ignoring other mythicist possibilities and thus further favouring historicity – one of them must be true. It is either *h* or ~*h*. Two theories enter, one theory leaves. Game on.

Chapter 4: Background Knowledge (Christianity)

This chapter and the next deal with what may be the most crucial element of Bayesian analyses. The overall probability cannot be determined without incorporating the prior probabilities, as well as the consequent probabilities. The prior probabilities are determined by the background knowledge, which is basically all the information we have available, apart from what is to be explained by the hypotheses (that would be the 'direct evidence'). The background knowledge also plays a role in determining the consequent probabilities, which also factor in the more direct evidence. Essentially, the purpose of these chapters is to demonstrate that there is nothing inherently implausible about minimal mythicism. This is vitally important, as there is seemingly nothing inherently implausible about the alternative, minimal historicity. These chapters are well-constructed, well-referenced, and contain many nuggets of information that, frankly, most mainstream scholars will have unfortunately been unaware of.

Carrier begins, though he is no fan of 'parallelomania', by explaining how the story of Jesus – particularly as portrayed in Mark's gospel – is similar to the story of the earlier Romulus (one of the founders of Rome), with the latter even having a biography written about him by a known historian (unlike with Jesus).[1115] He provides a handy summary:

> There were, in fact, numerous pre-Christian savior gods who became incarnate and underwent sufferings or trials, even deaths and resurrections. None of them actually existed. Neither did Romulus. Yet all were placed in history, and often given detailed biographies. Just like Plutarch's.[1116]

While it is obvious that historical characters can, and many times do, become mythologised, it must be recognised that purely mythical characters can also become historicised (this is euhemerisation). That this may have happened in the case of Jesus cannot thus be so easily dismissed. That the historical can become mythicised and the mythical can become historicised can cause havoc with extant sources, as we shall later see.

Carrier then explains that he uses broad definitions of key terms like ‘crucifixion’ and ‘resurrection’.[1117] Apologists would object, no doubt, but they would have to ignore the ambiguity of ancient languages, the mutability of concepts, and the many documented cases of religious syncretism. Below are Carrier’s many elements of background knowledge. A warning is in order. These elements are so forceful, and arranged so perfectly, that you may already perceive the reasonableness of the minimal mythicist theory, long before the analysis is carried out.

Elements of Christian Origin

Element 1: Christianity has its origins in first-century Judaism. This is mainstream and uncontroversial.[1118]

Element 2: First-century Judaism was very diverse, and we know very little about the various sects.[1119] While it can make their job in demonstrating Jesus’ historicity more challenging, many mainstream scholars are well aware of this. Those that are not may as well stop now, do their homework, and come back when they are ready.

Element 3: Many first-century Jews expected a messiah.[1120] This is uncontroversial, though Carrier does provide numerous references to demonstrate how ancient messianic views were very diverse.

Element 4: There were numerous Jewish messianic cults in first-century Palestine.[1121] This might be denied, but Carrier cites many sources, including Josephus, who mentioned several messianic figures who had significant followings. These included The Samaritan, The Egyptian, and Theudas. Interestingly, even the New Testament mentions several, such as John the Baptist, and Simon Magus, so people on all sides of the debate should readily accept this element as true.

Element 5: Some pre-Christian Jews did expect a dying-and-rising messiah, or at the very least, would have been comfortable with the concept.[1122] Now we finally have something that historicist scholars can reasonably – at least at first glance – object to. Indeed, Carrier

perceives this as “the most controversial element in our background knowledge”. As part of his case, Carrier references the Jewish Talmud, which “explicitly says the suffering servant who dies in Isaiah 53 is the messiah”. Note that while The Old Testament itself may not explicitly contain this concept, the Talmud does, and that is what matters. That some pre-Christian Jews knew of the concept is what truly matters, not whether it came from the Torah, the Tanakh, or the Talmud. Even so, Isaiah 52-53 is obviously pre-Christian, and does say that ‘the chosen one of God’ will be executed and buried dishonourably to atone for the sins of Israel despite being innocent himself, and that he will be exalted for it. It is exceedingly likely that Jews that still read this as prophecy of the future would be comfortable with messianic stories that conformed to it.

While scholars could dismiss the Talmudic passages as post-dating Jesus, Carrier notes that that is a virtual impossibility – as if *non-Christian* Jews after Jesus’ lifetime would interpret the Old Testament as prophesying his very life! In any case, that this concept found its way into the Talmud proves that this is clearly not a concept that all Jews would find abhorrent. With Carrier then citing a rabbinical scholar who agrees (Daniel Boyarin), as well as well as several definitely pre-Christian works like the canonical book of Daniel (which features a dying messiah), the non-canonical *Wisdom of Solomon* (featuring a dying-and-rising ‘son of God’),[1123] and the Melchizedek Scroll[1124] (a.k.a. 11Q13, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which also features a divine dying/suffering messiah), it seems obvious that any attempt by mainstream historicists to say that such a concept would be unthinkable to pre-Christian Jews is disingenuous. Even if none of this is conclusive proof that pre-Christian Jews *expected* such a messiah, it demonstrates that the theory is at least plausible, and should not be dismissed out of hand.

Note also that much of this should be uncontroversial, when it is no longer assumed that the Jews only relied on the books of the Old Testament. As I noted earlier, Ehrman seems to do just that, asking where *xxx* and *yyy* can be found in the Old Testament. That obscures the reality of the situation. The first-century Jews did not just have access to the books of the Old Testament. They also had access to Pagan writings, and access to numerous Jewish – though non-canonical – traditions and texts. Why

should we ignore the intertestamental literature?[1125] Knowing this, Carrier delves into just such pre-Christian Jewish sources and makes connections that, in hindsight, seem embarrassingly obvious.

Element 6: It is all too easy to combine the "suffering-and-dying servant of Isaiah 52-53", the "messiah of Daniel 9", and the "man in Zechariah 3 and 6 named 'Jesus Rising' who is confronted by Satan in God's abode in heaven and there crowned king, given all of God's authority, holds the office of high priest, and will build up 'God's house' (which is how Christians described their church)", to create a figure that looks remarkably like the mythicists' Celestial Jesus.[1126] After noting the many similarities between these three Biblical passages, Carrier concludes:

> The significance of this is that if such a connection had been made, the connector would have before him, in a simple pesher of Jewish scripture, a celestial being named Jesus Christ Rising, a high priest of God, in opposition to Satan, who is wrongly executed even though innocent, and dies to atone for all sins, is buried and subsequently 'raised', exalted to the highest station in heaven, appointed king with supreme heavenly power by God, and who will then build God's house (the church). That sounds exactly like Christianity. And all from connecting just three passages in the OT that already have distinctive overlapping similarities. Such a coincidence cannot be ignored; it must be included in our background knowledge. Would Christians really have been that lucky, that all this connected so obviously? Or are we seeing here where the whole idea of the Christian gospel came from in the first place?

Element 7: The Biblical book of Daniel was a very influential messianic text, which could well have been (perceived as) predicting a messiah's arrival in the early first-century.[1127] The former part is self-evident, given the many "commentaries on Daniel recovered from Qumran"; it is Carrier's latter point that is of interest. Given the "messianic timetable" described in Daniel 9:23-27, as Christians are well aware of, it is easy to conceive that some Jews would have expected the messiah to arrive, 'conveniently' around the same time that the so-called Historical Jesus' was walking the Earth. As we are atheists, and not Christians, we should not see this as true prophecy, or happy coincidence, but as an indication that certain Jews may have invented what they expected: a first-century messiah figure.

Carrier cites ancient historians such as Josephus, Suetonius, and Tacitus, who are – in a delicious irony – often invoked as sources for the Historical Jesus, as indicating that Daniel's messianic prophecy may have inspired the Jewish War. In other words, we may have here, a self-fulfilling prophecy. People believed that something was going to happen, so they made it happen. Carrier notes, that it seems stupid to go to (in what would be a suicidal) war against the might of Rome, unless these Jews truly believed that God was backing them, and was about to send the messiah. Carrier also notes that Christianity appears to be the 'spiritual solution' to the cognitive dissonance caused by Jewish military failures. This, of course, works on both theories, so shouldn't be controversial.

Element 8: We cannot just assume that only Christians searched the Old Testament scriptures for secret messages about Jesus, after the fact (which explains the many 'fulfilled prophecies' in the Gospels). Pre-Christian Jews were also "searching the scriptures for secret messages from God about the coming messiah".[1128] This is clearly evidenced by the previously mentioned sources, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Talmud(s), and other Jewish texts, so while historicists may find this uncomfortable, the fact is undeniable.

Element 9: First-century Jews held many more books as inspired by God, than what is included in the Old Testament.[1129] Carrier argues this at length, even referring to Christian/New Testament quotations of such books or variants of canonical books. There are even more examples. Scholars know that the non-canonical book of Enoch is quoted or alluded to several times in the New Testament. Furthermore, the non-canonical book of Jasher seems to be referred to in the Old Testament. Lengthy argument is really unnecessary here. That Jews of the era held more than the 'canonical' writings as sacred is an undeniable fact, and the same applies to many early Christians, with Christian books that did not make it into the New Testament canon. The main point is that there are many more possible influences on the development of Christianity, than many will unfortunately be unaware of. We can't just pretend that 'the Bible' is our only reasonable source. Furthermore, we cannot assume that all Jews were of one mind.

Element 10: Christianity began as a Jewish messianic cult preaching a *spiritually* victorious messiah.[1130] This should not be controversial, and works on both theories. Even in the earliest extant sources, Jesus is portrayed as a divine being.

Elements of Christian Religion

Element 11: The earliest known form of Christianity was a mystery religion.[1131] By 'mystery religion', Carrier means "any Hellenistic cult in which individual salvation was procured by a ritual initiation into a set of 'mysteries', the knowledge of which and participation in which were key to ensuring a blessed eternal life". He finds this to be "beyond any reasonable doubt", though it is often denied by mainstream historicists, who like to focus on the differences (which are expected), rather than the similarities. Carrier's definition indeed seems quite unobjectionable, except for his mention of the 'mysteries'. However, he correctly points out that Paul, in the earliest Christian writings, constantly refers to essential Christian doctrines as mysteries.

Utilising ancient sources for the mysteries of Osiris, and the Bacchic mysteries, Carrier asserts that mystery religions tended to centre on a "central savior deity", who was a "son of god" or a "daughter of god", whose suffering led to the "salvation" for cultic participants, and whose death or trials (which might include a resurrection, of sorts) were described as a "passion". This certainly sounds similar to beliefs about Jesus! It is certainly not absurd to think that Christianity began as a *Jewish* mystery religion. Carrier recognises that all mystery religions are essentially a result of cultural syncretism. For example, "the mysteries of Isis and Osiris were a syncretism of Egyptian and Hellenistic elements". Simply replace 'Egyptian' or 'Phrygian' or 'Persian' (and so forth) with 'Jewish' and the result will look remarkably like Christianity. He also notes that a "ritual meal" (i.e. the Eucharist) and initiation rituals symbolic of what the god endured (i.e. baptism) were common, further revealing, through an absurd number of scholarly references, that this is true of "mystery cults that were extremely popular in the very era that Christianity arose".

Carrier further alludes to the secrecy of many mystery religions, which could explain why the origins of Christianity are so shrouded in, well, *mystery*, and further explains that Christianity conforms to trends that are distinctive of Hellenistic mystery religions, such as syncretism, the trajectory towards monotheism, a shift to individualism, and cosmopolitanism. He finally highlights the evidence of such mysteries within various forms of pre-Christian Judaism, citing Josephus, writings from Qumran, and modern (and mainstream) scholars, poignantly noting that we know too little of them to be sure how much they may have influenced Christianity. While mainstream historicist scholars will obviously be hesitant to accept this element of background knowledge, that Christianity at least looks like a mystery religion cannot be reasonably denied.

Element 12: Early Christians believed that they became, through baptism, 'brothers of the Lord', and 'sons of God'.[1132] This should not prove too controversial (many Biblical and other references are supplied), though critics are welcome to argue over how significant this is.

Element 13: As is common in mystery religions, early Christians used symbols, myths, and allegories to convey secret doctrines to initiates.[1133] Carrier spends a lot of time on this, and again, it is not all that necessary. Clement of Alexandria 'admitted' that this is the case, and even Jesus (apparently) warned against casting the pearls before swine,[1134] whilst also declaring that secrets were given to some and parables to others, so that the latter would not understand![1135] Nevertheless, Carrier's extensive quotations of Clement and the Pauline Epistles convincingly reveal that Paul was wary of sharing all he knew with common Christians. For example, 2 Corinthians 12 has Paul learning all sorts of awesome things while in heaven, but he is unfortunately not permitted to share them.[1136] Carrier similarly quotes Ignatius as also implying that there are multiple levels of Christians who would be privy to more and more information, as befits their rank. Carrier also refers to the work of Margaret Barker, a Christian scholar from Cambridge, in demonstrating that pre-Christian Judaisms also made use of secret doctrines.

Element 14: Such myths and allegories often symbolised more esoteric truths, which may have involved events that occurred ‘above’. [1137] Carrier discusses claims from the ancient Greek historian Plutarch, namely that the stories about gods like Isis and Osiris being on Earth are not literally true, nor do they indicate the deification of actual historical persons; rather, these stories allegorise the actual conflicts ‘above’. Carrier also defers to Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jew who often looked upon the Old Testament scriptures allegorically. The ancient Christian teacher Origen favoured an allegorical approach as well, even declaring that reading the text literally is ignorant (*Against Celsus* 4.50).

Carrier provides a great case that various Christians, Jews, and Pagans interpreted their religious stories allegorically. What is less obvious is that the concealed truths concerned the happenings ‘above’. For that he referenced only Plutarch, but also cites Philo, who thinks similarly, as evidenced when he associates the Garden of Eden story with cosmic, rather than Earthly, events. In any case, this clearly shows that the hypothesis of minimal mythicism cannot be dismissed out of hand. Additionally, all this talk of allegories and even outright deceptions surely strengthens my own case for Historical Jesus agnosticism, whether or not a Celestial Jesus was involved.

Element 15: Many important early Christians made claims of visions and voices, and may have been schizotypal.[1138] I have here made a slight improvement, as Carrier opens with a definite “Christianity began as…” which I feel is a little too strong, at this stage. My more nuanced version is not up for debate. We see in the epistles of Paul, for example, our earliest Christian source, that *all* of his interactions with Jesus were essentially hallucinations. In fact, this is necessary, as even historicists recognise that Paul did not know the Historical Jesus, so that this element works on both theories. Carrier cites many sources linking religious experiences with naturalistic explanations, leaving no doubt that early Christians like Paul probably were mentally ill, otherwise schizotypal, or (possibly well-meaning) liars. Also, in a curious mixture of options, Carrier even wonders if people pretended to have such hallucinations,

given the reverence for such ‘holy people’. Indeed, Paul indicates how desirable such ‘spiritual gifts’ were in 1 Corinthians.

All but conservative Christian scholars – who I exclude from this debate among atheists – should happily accept this element. Historicists may go on to argue that it is irrelevant as Paul is not truly our earliest Christian source, if they wish, but that would rely on a fallacious appeal to the innumerable imaginary sources behind the Gospels that historicists like Ehrman and Casey ‘pretend’ to have access to.

Element 16: Early Christians received information about Jesus from revelation and scripture.[1139] This is not up for debate. One need only read the canonical letters of Paul, who happens to be our earliest Christian source. Interestingly, pre-Christian messianic Jews were already finding ‘hidden messages’ and ‘facts’ about the present, in the scriptures. As Carrier notes, “The entire pesher genre was devoted to that very thing”. He concludes that a “living, earthly Jesus was simply not the only available source for receiving sayings and teachings from and about him”, and that we cannot declare that Christians wouldn’t have done what these earlier Jews did. This seems correct, partly due to the obvious fact that the earliest Christians were Jews.

Element 17: The key elements of the gospel story can be read out of pre-Christian Jewish texts.[1140] This is generally unobjectionable, particularly when we look beyond the Old Testament and consult all the pesher literature, and so forth. Even Christians would accept this, believing that these Jewish sources, particularly the Old Testament, predict or foreshadow Jesus’ coming. For us atheists, however, historicists would have to generally be content with accepting an absurd coincidence, while those more sceptically inclined will posit that these ancient Jewish texts naturally resulted in the origin of the Jesus story. This element simply means that while a Historical Jesus might possibly have existed, it is not necessary, to explain Christianity’s origins, and later developments.

Appealing to Ockham’s Razor, historicists might say that it is simpler to posit a human behind it all. Mythicists would have a point, however, that with the overarching influence of the pre-Christian Jewish texts, we

can simply cut out the middleman. So it is actually the former group that (literally!) posits more entities than what is necessary.

Element 18: Jesus Christ was believed to have fulfilled the two greatest annual Jewish sacrifices, those of Passover and Yom Kippur, effectively replacing the Jewish Temple.[1141] This should be uncontroversial to mainstream, and even – or especially – Christian, scholars. I would add that the first Gospel, Mark, was written around the time of the Temple's destruction (how convenient), though Carrier believes that Peter and Paul think along similar lines, decades before Mark. As I explained earlier, while the need for a 'spiritual solution' may have been more urgent around the time that Mark was written, the earlier Christians still faced the problem of a corrupted and inaccessible Temple.

Element 19: Our earliest confirmed Christian author, Paul, only experienced a revelatory – rather than a living/Earthly – Jesus, and began writing many years after he converted.[1142] This too should prove uncontroversial, so long as proper respect is given to the mainstream dating of *extant* sources.

Element 20: The earliest Christians required potential Gentile converts to first convert to Judaism, with Paul being (or among) the first to discard this requirement.[1143] Many secular scholars would have no issue here, particularly as this theme is found throughout Paul's letters. Carrier notes that Paul never defers to an Earthly Jesus' authority on this issue, but that is true in general. Paul never defers to an Earthly Jesus, period.

Element 21: There existed many different Christian sects, with often wildly different beliefs, throughout the first century.[1144] Any scholar that objects to this is simply not a scholar, be they Christian, secular historicist, or secular mythicist/agnostic. Not only do we have ample extra-Biblical evidence of this, but the New Testament books also make it abundantly clear. Unfortunately, very little is known about some of the more divergent sects. As Carrier recognises, it were the surviving sects that controlled the texts. It follows then, that scholars "cannot simply assume surviving texts report what was normative for the original or

earliest sects of Christianity. There is a great deal we just don't know, and we have to factor that ignorance into our reasoning, as many scholars have pointed out".

Element 22: We really don't know what happened within the Christian movement between 64 and 95 CE, while we can surmise, somewhat unfortunately, that the leadership had been decimated around that time. [1145] This is undoubtedly true (demonstrated in part by the times elapsing between first century authentic epistles), and much of what Carrier claims about this period, can easily apply to the early first century and the early second century. Indeed, but for a handful of sectarian and unreliable Christian writings and an obvious forgery attributed to Josephus, we know nothing. It is fair to assume, though, that the Jewish War and the Middle Eastern famine mentioned by Josephus (and the possible Neronian persecutions – this is contested) led to the deaths of many Christian leaders. Utilising reliable statistics, Carrier figures that the first generation of Christians had perished by this time. He concludes:

> The significance of all this is that in that period (from 64 to 95 CE) we have no clear idea who was in charge or which churches they controlled or what schisms developed or what disputes arose or how they were resolved, or even whether they *were* resolved. We cannot know if the secret oral knowledge known to Paul and reserved for 'mature' members of the church was accurately or devotedly passed on – or if it was, to whom, or in what ways it was altered. And we cannot identify anyone who was in a position to prevent the development of novel interpretations and beliefs – even when Peter and Paul were still alive, the Epistles reveal their inability to prevent such schismatic developments (Element 21), so control of dogma must have been even less efficacious when no clear authority remained. And with no clear authority in control for thirty years – an entire generation – there is no limit to what can happen to an institution and its teachings, especially one built (at least in substantial part) on myths and secrets, two things that are the easiest to change (hence see Chapter 6, §7).

I think that what Carrier is trying to tell the historicist scholars who are so certain about their views on the Historical Jesus, is, "you don't know Jack". I would add that this is the exact period that the Gospels are being written. It seems very plausible then, that if the Gospels (and even much of the Epistles) are intended to be allegorical, that Christians generally 'forgot' the 'truths' buried within. It is all too easy to imagine that leaderless bands of enthusiastic Christians, no longer restrained by their more subtle and knowledgeable mentors, would come to literally

believe in things not meant to be taken literally, and to further, tragically, see the few remaining earlier-type believers as heretical.

I suppose that some critics might ask why all this would only affect Christianity. Why not Judaism, too? Well, apart from the fact that early Christianity was a part of Judaism, and also that Christianity was very new and not thousands of years old, such sweeping changes did occur in ‘Judaism’ too. The Sadducees were effectively wiped out, and the Pharisees pretty much took over. Their being more ‘liberal’, and less dependent on the Temple, no doubt made them well placed to endure. They were the predecessors to the rabbinical Jews that would come to dominate the Jewish world, even into the present.

Chapter 5: Background Knowledge (Context)

While the previous chapter dealt with background knowledge directly relating to Christianity, this chapter surveys background knowledge regarding the context (political, religious, and literary) in which Christianity began.

Elements of Political Context

Element 23: The Romans annexed Judea in 6 CE, contradicting many Biblically-influenced Jewish expectations of grandeur.[1146] This is established fact, and Carrier's further assertion that this resulted in violent tension and inevitable cognitive dissonance should also prove unproblematic to critical scholars.

Element 24: At least some Jews would have recognised the impossibility of overcoming the Romans, *physically*.[1147] This is obvious, yet it is crucial that Carrier makes mention of it. It makes it very clear that (some of?) the Jews would have required a spiritual victory.

Element 25: The actual or perceived corruption and moral decay of the Jewish civil and temple elites led to condemnation and factionalising among Jewish sects.[1148] This is incontestable, as evidenced by numerous Biblical and non-Biblical accounts.

Element 26: These 'corrupt' Jewish elites became the scapegoats for God's failed promises, to many Jews in the early first century.[1149] This too is incontestable, being multiply attested.

Element 27: The temple remained the central focus for many messianic Jews, leading to violent attempts (against the Romans and the complying and corrupt Jewish elites) to re-take control of it.[1150] Another uncontroversial point.

Element 28: A *spiritual* solution to the impossibility of a physical Jewish victory is natural and easily conceived.[1151] Christianity conveniently renders the Jewish Temple unnecessary. And as Carrier recognises, a spiritual victory is always possible, and doesn't require violence or vast resources. With all this political context, the rise of Christians and Jewish Zealots is expected, rather than surprising. None of this should be controversial amongst mainstream critical scholars. I must also add that it is astounding that mainstream critical scholars would accept the implication that Jews created a spiritual solution and think that it was applied to the Historical Jesus that existed (which seems rather convenient), rather than recognising that the Historical Jesus is not necessary, and could easily have been invented. As earlier noted, an 'invented messiah' could even be preferable, as negatives generally can't be disproven (at least with utmost certainty).

Element 29: Modern 'Cargo Cults' are similar to Christianity in attributes and in the socio-political situations that created them.[1152] While mainstream scholars will of course wish to downplay this, as they do with parallels in general, it is undoubtedly true. Many of these saviour religions revolve around mythical messiahs, such as John Frum, who are believed by adherents to be real people. After providing a lengthy description of Cargo Cults and how they often originated,[1153] Carrier adds:

> In fact, these are now recognized as the common conditions giving rise to all martyrdom movements, from Islamic to Buddhist to pagan, Jewish, and Christian: a subject people, in relative poverty, powerless, effectively dominated by a foreign people (either directly or through collusion with an unresponsive local elite) who are racially and culturally different from themselves, and whose economic and military capability is so awesome it cannot be overcome. Anthropology thus teaches us that Christianity is exactly the sort of
>
> thing one would expect to arise in those conditions.

Indeed. One wonders why a Historical Jesus would be necessary. Carrier ends by referring to the rising popularity of syncretic Hellenistic mystery religions, positing that we could predict "what Christianity would look like without ever having heard of it". Given that this could all be done naturally, and without a Historical Jesus, we have to seriously consider whether this is simply a coincidence. In other words, it is not

necessary that the Christian story is true (as Christians believe), or that the Historical Jesus existed (as secular historicists believe). The more sceptical mythicists could plausibly be right.

Elements of Religious and Philosophical Context

Element 30: Early first-century Palestinian Jews would have seen many interactions between various Jewish and Pagan concepts.[1154] This is so obvious and well-attested (even within Biblical sources) that it is an utter embarrassment when scholars attempt to deny it (some do). This was not North Korea. This was a part of the world that was subject to foreign cultures, and which encouraged religious tourism. And as we have discussed earlier, there was a great diversity in 'Judaism', with the Pharisees being relatively liberal, and the religious beliefs of most Jews unaccounted for. Though it is unnecessary, Carrier does his job thoroughly, by appealing to many specialist scholars, believers and non-believers alike.

Element 31: The salvific dying-and-rising son/daughter of a god was a common feature of pagan religions around the time – and place – that Christianity arose.[1155] This is another element that is well-proven in objective (and even Christian!) scholarship, though ardent historicists will try to downplay it by stressing differences (which would actually be expected). Carrier very cleverly notes that the same cannot be said of ancient China, correctly stating that if Christianity arose there, it would be much more unique and astonishing.

Element 32: Early Christian teachings were influenced by pagan (typically Greek) philosophy.[1156] Mainstream scholars generally accept this, though they will typically dispute the magnitude of these influences.

Element 33: Early Christianity was also influenced by Jewish sects. [1157] This should be beyond obvious and is accepted by secular scholars. While Old Testament influences are expected, the links to the Pharisees (such as Rabbi Hillel) and the Essenes are well established in the literature. The overarching implication of this and the previous elements is

that “Christianity is a syncretism of pagan and Jewish salvation ideology, and as such differs from each precisely in what it borrows from the other.” This is all true, and is obviously of deep concern to historicists.

Element 34: Popular cosmology of the time held that the universe was geocentric, spherical, and layered, with many of these layers being ‘heavens’.[1158] Things are really heating up now. If the latter is true, there is simply no reason to reject theories on Christian origins that revolve around a purely Celestial Jesus. And Carrier doesn’t seem bothered about showing how this is true for *Pagans* (that fact is obvious for scholars of antiquity). He takes on the more challenging and relevant task of proving that this is true for Jews and early Christians. Carrier even refers to the work of James Tabor, a historicist, to show that this view was popular among Jews and early Christians. More importantly, we cannot ignore Genesis 1:1, where God is said to have “created the heavens and the earth”, or the Jewish Talmud, which discusses many heavens, which contain angels and physical objects. The references to such in other Jewish literature such as the pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls, makes this an undeniable fact. But best of all, we have Paul:

> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.[1159]

The *third* heaven? Regarding the relatively simplistic belief in one Earth and one Heaven, Paul clearly didn’t get the memo!

Element 35: Popular cosmology of the time also held that the firmament (the first heaven, directly above us), was a corrupt region, compared to the purity of the heavens beyond it.[1160] While unconformable, to historicists, this element is easily established by Carrier who cites mainly pagan (Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch, Cicero) sources, but also Jewish (Philo) and Christian (Paul, Margaret Barker) sources too.

Element 36: Because of this division between the perfect and the imperfect, much religious thought involved intercessory entities; special

beings that act on our behalf.[1161] Carrier again calls on the likes of Plato and Plutarch to establish that this was true for certain Pagans. But this concept can also be found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and the works of the Jewish Philo of Alexandria, as most clearly expressed in his *Logos* figure, which should sound familiar. Importantly, this concept is very well attested in Judeo-Christian literature, in general (i.e. angels), most obviously in the figure of the most recognised mediator of all-time, Jesus Christ.

Element 37: Popular cosmology of the time also held that the firmament was filled with beings, who battled one another, and who meddled in human affairs.[1162] The usual Pagan and Jewish (both canonical, and non-canonical – like 1 Enoch) sources are trotted out, but Carrier also supplies much evidence from the New Testament. Paul and his followers make much mention of such beings, and the 'powers' or 'rulers' (archons) spoken of cannot be merely human government officials. These authors want Christians to combat the archons, but saw the human authorities as allies, as they were "God's servants".[1163] From the forged epistle to the Ephesians:

> As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.[1164]

From the Christian perspective, it is clearly Satan, the "god of this world/age",[1165] who "rules over the firmament". Even the Gospels lend some support, with 'John' referring to the evil "prince of this world". [1166]

Element 38: These heavens were filled with living beings and other things, with some thinking that everything on Earth was a mere copy – an imperfect one – of what was above.[1167] The former has already been well established, so it is the latter that is now of interest. As above, the usual sources are appealed to (Plato, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Paul, and other early Christians), with the addition of this interesting passage from Hebrews, which indicates that Jesus' sacrifice in space is superior to the animal sacrifices on Earth:

> In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.[1168]

Carrier also notes that one Jewish document (the *Revelation of Moses*) "says Adam was buried in Paradise, literally up in outer space, in the third heaven, complete with celestial linen and oils". I wonder if another certain character important to Christians was also buried 'up there'…[1169]

Element 39: Some Jews and early Christians held that there were two Adams, one perfect (in some celestial realm), and one imperfect (here on Earth), with the first Christians seemingly connecting Jesus to the celestial Adam.[1170] Philo is once again appealed to, but perhaps more importantly, Paul makes this element clear when he describes Jesus as "the last Adam" who is "of heaven".[1171] Historicists need not baulk; this element works on both theories.

Element 40: The Christian idea of the firstborn son of God, who was the true high priest in Heaven, and who was called 'the *Logos*', was already held by some pre-Christian Jews, who may have associated this figure with the name 'Jesus'.[1172] The main reference is, of course, Philo of Alexandria, who connected his Christ-like Logos character to the priestly 'Jesus' found in Zechariah 6. In light of criticisms Carrier has received over this remark, let me state that not once does Carrier say that Philo called his *Logos*, 'Jesus'. Carrier only reports what is obvious from the evidence, that Philo links his *Logos* figure, with the Jesus found in Zechariah 6. This is undoubtedly true. Apart from the many and already-discussed New Testament passages that indicate the links between early Christians' Jesus Christ and Philo's Logos, Carrier carefully explains how Philo links his *Logos* with the celestial Adam, which, as we saw earlier, is what Paul did with his Jesus. To ignore Philo's possible (likely) influence on Paul, then, is to cease being an objective scholar.

I personally wonder if there is not some lost work of Philo wherein he is more explicit about the link to Zechariah 6 he identified, and actually

calls the *Logos*, 'Jesus'. It surely would not be something that Christian scribes would have wanted to preserve. Interestingly, even if Philo never did call the *Logos*, 'Jesus', I wonder if it is likely that Paul, or some predecessor, seemingly knowing all about Philo's *Logos*, was inspired by Zechariah 6 to call his Christ 'Jesus', particularly as Philo had already made the connection. It seems to be far too coincidental (improbable?) that both these educated men would not imagine that the *Logos* was named 'Jesus', and that Paul only happens to call his *Logos*-like character, 'Jesus' because of actual historical events that were only written about decades after (in the Gospels) he was writing. We have ample reason to think that this Jewish and pre-Christian celestial Jesus could have influenced Paul's thinking, but we have no convincing evidence that Paul knew of the Gospels' story. That is no small point.

Element 41: The pre-Christian Jewish text, 1 Enoch, speaks of a Christ-like 'Son of Man' (a title ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels), whose name will be revealed in future, and whose identity will be kept secret so evildoers will not know him until the appointed time,[1173] and who can be likened to the celestial Adam and Philo's *Logos*.[1174] While Carrier employs numerous academic references, the primary source is 1 Enoch (referenced extensively by Carrier), which is well known as describing a divine messiah called the 'Son of Man', and is equally well known as having been an influence on early Christians (including New testament authors) and the Dead Sea Scrolls community.

Element 42: The Melchizedek document (from the Dead Sea Scrolls) describes the celestial and Christ-like Melchizedek, who is involved with the atoning of sins, and who will eventually defeat Satan and his allies. [1175] Carrier notes that Philo may have associated his *Logos* with Melchizedek, and references several modern scholars that find Jesus-Melchizedek parallels obvious.

Element 43: Voluntary human sacrifice – including substitutionary sacrifice – was highly regarded by both Pagans and Jews.[1176] Carrier provides numerous examples for something that is intuitively and evidentially very obvious. What is more interesting, is Carrier's assertion that "the more awful and shameful the manner of death, the more heroic

and powerful it was". If true, this directly counters the common historicist claim that 'no Jew would have made up the crucifixion of their Messiah'. Indeed, Carrier calls on Plato to demonstrate just that, and reveals that the concept can also be found in Paul's writings, such as where he notes that Paul claims that God exalted Christ after the latter humbled himself. [1177] Indeed, it is intuitive that victory is greater when it begins at the lowest of lows, and, as noted earlier, the reversal of wise/foolish, rich/poor, powerful/weak, and so forth, is a common theme throughout the New Testament. I suspect that that is partly what makes Christianity so popular.

In his typically logical fashion, Carrier then declares that an incredibly powerful sacrifice could replace the Jewish need for animal sacrifices and overcome the actual/effective loss (or imminent loss) of the Jewish Temple. And what could be more powerful than a sacrifice involving the humiliating death of God's firstborn son? Some Jews already believed in the latter, who was associated with the name 'Jesus', so it is certainly not crazy to posit that a Jew would use these established concepts to create – whole cloth – this spiritual solution to physical problems.

Elements of Literary Context

Element 44: Amongst ancient Jews and Pagans, fabricating religious stories was the norm, even when they were claimed as being true.[1178] This is a crucial element, as it allows us to question the intent of the Gospel (and other) accounts, and not just their reliability. Since we atheists are discussing amongst ourselves, this hardly needs justifying. We have no reason to believe documents that claim that zombies ran around Jerusalem or that great prophets flew up to Heaven on winged horses. Even the religious will happily acknowledge that most religious literature (i.e. that of alternative religions) has been fabricated. Now Carrier is correct in first attempting to establish whether a religious document does contain some truth, unlike mainstream historicist scholars who unfortunately – and uncritically – begin with that assumption.

Carrier does not just refer to obvious fictions like the *Ascension of Isaiah*; he also notes that Jewish mythology looked more like historical narratives (such as the canonical book of Daniel) and that biographies (such as those written by Philo, and Plutarch's euhemerised account of Romulus) were also written of figures we now consider pure fictions. Carrier even has the gall to cite numerous mainstream historians – such as Charles Fornara and Michael Grant – supporting his assertion that even 'sober histories' (i.e. outside of faith literature) "were not consistently honest or reliable". He also quotes mainstream historicist James Crossley as admitting that "we must expect the Gospel writers to make up stories just as the Jews and pagans did". In other words, we have reason to doubt many ancient writings, but especially religious ones. If any critical scholar doubts this, they cease to be a critical scholar.

Carrier then states that with faith literature being primarily fabricated – in part or in whole – there is a very high *prior probability* that the same is true of Christian literature, and explains how most early Christian literature (not limited to the canonical writings) was fictitious. He concludes:

> This was clearly the norm, not the exception. Most of what Christians wrote were lies. We therefore should approach everything they wrote with distrust.

Element 45: Euhemerisation – where a mythical or celestial being was historicised as an actual person – was common in ancient faith literature. [1179] There is nothing to object to here. This has obviously happened throughout history (which resulted in fictional biographies), though Carrier does go to the trouble of citing Plutarch and Euhemerus. Historicists cannot dispute this; what they can dispute is if this happened to Jesus.

Element 46: 'Hero' narratives were also popular, and the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus seems to be one such 'hero'.[1180] This too is exceedingly obvious, with Carrier explaining how similar the Gospel Jesus is to heroic portrayals of the likes of Socrates and Aesop. Of course, Aesop probably didn't exist… If a non-existent Aesop could be later historicised, written about, including as a 'hero', and had teachings ascribed to him, "the same could have happened for Jesus". Mainstream scholars cannot

reasonably object to this. Carrier has not said here that it did happen for Jesus, but that it could have.

Element 47: 'Hero' narratives involving an 'ascension to godhood' and a 'missing body' – to which the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus conforms – were also revered amongst ancient pagans.[1181] Carrier notes the many similarities between the Gospel Jesus and Romulus, including the hero being the son of God, the hero's death being accompanied by darkness, the corpse going missing, a resurrection, a 'great commission', a later assumption, and deification. Carrier stresses that a mixture of the lives of Aesop and Romulus, with a sprinkling of Jewish thought, would pretty much result in the Gospel Jesus.[1182]

Element 48: Gospel Jesus also conforms to the 'divine king' or 'Rank-Raglan' hero-type, which was ubiquitous in the pagan world.[1183] The – unobjectionable – point is that the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels has much in common with mythological 'hero' characters, such as the hero's mother being a virgin, the hero's father being of royal stock, the hero surviving an early assassination attempt, virtually nothing being said of the hero's childhood, dying atop a high place, the hero's body going missing, and the hero being crowned or hailed as a king. One scholar complained to me about the latter, as the Historical Jesus certainly was not a king. This is a simple misunderstanding, as we are here concerned not with the hypothetical Historical Jesus, of whom we know nothing, and are trying to discover, but with the Gospels, who portray Jesus not only as a king, but as the king of kings!

Carrier then looks at how many figures fit more than half of the 22 attributes, finding that most, if not all (when the likes of Moses are ignored, seeing as how many scholars now reject the historicity of many important Old Testament figures) of the fifteen characters apart from Jesus were not historical persons. Alexander the Great came close. Even if he should be included, a notion that Carrier actually does allow for in his math, to his credit, the point is well made. Characters that conform to this type are almost always purely fictional. Some historical characters might be included, but most included characters are wholly fictional.[1184] Note that this overwhelming tendency towards non-historical characters occurs

despite the fact that far more ‘real people’ have existed, compared to fictional characters that have been created. It is surely no small matter that Jesus is the only ‘historical’ person on the list, and that he scored equal second.

Carrier continues, “every single one of them was regarded as a historical person and placed in history in narratives written about them”. He then notes that depending on interpretation, Jesus could have outright taken the lead on the list, fitting with all of the attributes, instead of missing out on two. He points to non-canonical tradition about Jesus’ *parents being related* and supposes that if *marrying the daughter of his predecessor* could be interpreted allegorically, Jesus ‘married’ the Church, who is the ‘daughter’ of Israel.[1185] We could argue over whether ‘spiritualised’ elements should count, but Carrier argues as much in favour of historicity as is possible anyway.

Nevertheless, I must note that the well-received commentary on the biblical book of Exodus by the respected William Propp does just that, perceiving, among other things, Israel as God’s wife. Propp does well to identify folkloric elements in the obviously fictional tale.[1186] In this way, Jesus’ supposedly being married to the Church, the successor to Israel, could satisfy the ‘marries a princess’ element. Anyway, Jesus ranks very highly, doing well even if we restrict our data to the gospel of Matthew or the gospel of Mark, on a list that is dominated by fictional characters. This fact cannot be ignored, and must factor into Carrier’s inevitable calculations.

And so concludes Carrier’s very lengthy and sometimes tedious discussion of the background knowledge.[1187] It was surely worth it, however, as much of this would be unknown to scholars and laypeople alike, and convincingly argues, like the solving of a puzzle, that the Celestial Jesus theory is certainly plausible, if not outright probable – without the analysis even having begun. That this theory is the more probable one will effectively be argued for in the remaining chapters. Some of this information is also particularly crucial in forming the all-important prior probabilities, which Carrier turns to next.

Chapter 6: The Prior Probability

Both theories seem plausible, as historical figures can become deified and mythological characters can become historicised, so this chapter is crucial. Carrier begins by explaining the concept of a prior probability. Corporate mascots, like Betty Crocker, tend to be fictional, so when we try to determine if a corporate mascot is historical, we would be justified in assigning a low prior probability. However, Colonel Sanders existed; does this cause a problem? No. The low prior probability does not say that all corporate mascots are fictional, just that most are.[1188] Carrier likens the modern corporate mascot to the ancient religious mascot and notes that historicity is not required. Only belief is required. Indeed, a historical person could prove problematic, as it is easier to make things up about a non-existing person.[1189] And as already discussed, religious people did make things up, which may or may not extend to the very existence of the 'hero'. What we need to discover is whether "Jesus was a euhemerized mythical hero" or a "mythologized historical man".[1190] To do that, we need prior probabilities.

Now, the prior probability of any person existing is pretty high, as fictional people are less common. That's not a particularly helpful reference class, however. We can and ought to employ a reference class that incorporates much of our background knowledge.[1191] So says the rule of greater knowledge. We should not ignore many of the facts out of convenience. We should try to incorporate as much of our relevant background information as possible. One that seems pertinent is the Rank-Raglan 'hero' reference class. Objectors might say that we could stick to the 'any person' class or assume ignorance and start with equal (50-50) priors. That is fine, and Carrier would not object.

The evidence he factors into his prior probabilities would still have to be accounted for by his critics, though on the consequent side of the equation. This point also halts any attempt to say that Paul's portrayal of Jesus should have been used instead (because he is the source of the earliest documents – though this is counter-intuitive since Paul says

virtually nothing about an Earthly Jesus, if that, and historicists do indeed think that the later Gospels portray the earlier view of Jesus). All of this is relevant information and will be factored in somehow. Whether that is on the prior side or the consequent side, doesn't really matter.

Either way, Carrier's following argumentation still applies. Critics might also say that this is ridiculous, as there is lots of evidence for the Historical Jesus. Fine. That gets factored in later; it does not get factored in to the *prior* probability calculations.[1192] In any case, Gospel Jesus conforms well to the Rank-Raglan class, as do many other religious figures, so Carrier shall make use of it. This is evidence that cannot be ignored. Note that Carrier actually points out that Jesus conforms to many other myth-heavy references classes as well, but finds the Rank-Raglan class to be the most useful because it has the most members, and thus its content is the most statistically significant.

Beginning with the observation that Jesus is so conveniently named ('Jesus Christ' = 'Saviour Messiah'), Carrier finds it far more impactful that of all the fifteen people that scored more than half of the Rank-Raglan criteria, all but one (Jesus, which is disputed) is entirely mythical.[1193] Apart from Jesus, then, whose existence we are querying, we have 0 out of 14 that are historical. Carrier calculates that the prior probability for Jesus' existence is therefore around 6%.[1194] Not a good start for the historicists. But Carrier intends to argue *a fortiori*, so shall be generous. He allows us to imagine that Moses and Joseph are historical, and, so as not to offend our Pagan friends, throws in a couple more. So now 4 out of 15 are historical, leading to a prior probability (when rounded up) for Jesus' existence at a neat 1/3 (or 33%).[1195] Note that this is doubly important, as some critics may like to include the likes of Alexander the Great, by playing with the facts, and then proclaiming that this approach amounts to nought. That is not true, as Carrier has already included 4 'wildcards', and, once again, the relatively low prior probability does not say that such depictions mean that there is *definitely* no underlying historical person behind them, but that they *tend* to be entirely fictional.

Similarly, Ehrman had earlier criticised Price for also applying the Rank-Raglan criteria to Jesus, alleging that they could work with a figure

like Peregrinus, who was supposedly a real person.[1196] Again, this has been dealt with above, but it is also interesting to note that while these other figures, like Alexander, do have 'neutral' sources, *all* of Jesus' early sources portray him in the 'mythical fashion' – so perhaps Carrier's calculations can be considered generous![1197] Back to Carrier's work, necessarily, the prior for the mythicist theory is then 2/3 (or 67%). In other words, with Carrier having been generous to historicity, people that make the grade are at least twice as likely to be mythical, despite the fact that there have been far fewer mythical people than historical people.

Carrier then goes about fending off various possible objections, declaring that this does not assume that Jesus began as a Rank-Raglan hero, and that alternative reference classes will not help the historicist.[1198] The information just considered must be factored in, and Carrier demonstrates this mathematically. Persons portrayed in this way tend to be entirely fictional. On the possible objection that minimal mythicism could be less plausible because it entails more premises, Carrier notes that, with minimal historicity occupying 1/3 of the prior probability space, the mythicist theories as a whole *must* occupy 2/3, further explaining that the mythicist alternatives to minimal mythicism are so complex and implausible that minimal mythicism essentially occupies 100% of mythicism's 2/3 share.[1199] To be clear, none of this affects the prior for minimal historicity at all.

As yet, no scholar has made a convincing argument that Carrier's priors are wrong. Interestingly, the esteemed historicist Bart Ehrman would seemingly be forced to accept this low prior for historicity, as evidenced by his own admission at how Jesus' portrayal might effect our investigations:

> The fact that Jesus was cast in the mold of pagan divine men does indeed create a difficult situation for historians who want to get beyond the idiom of the stories to the historical reality that lies behind them.[1200]

Exactly. This 'difficulty' is a direct symptom of the low prior probability for historicity, which is just what we arrived at. Carrier also has much to say regarding the possible objection that such rapid legendary development (from a celestial deity to a historicised figure) is very

improbable.[1201] Firstly, this process can happen from the first day. Secondly, we have ample evidence of this, such as the numerous myths that quickly spread about the Roswell incident – in a society that was far more sophisticated. Thirdly, that Christians preserved the truth in the early first century is an untenable notion. No truth-keeping institutions existed, and the documentary evidence reveals that many – and varying – fictions did rapidly arise, as particularly evidenced by the pace of legendary invention between the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Indeed, any early Christian leaders and/or institutions could just as easily have preserved allegories and fictions, as well as truths. As discussed earlier, secret teachings and the loss of leadership would also make such preservation of truth very implausible.

Carrier concludes by allaying historicists' fears over the upcoming calculations, when the prior for historicity is a paltry 33%.[1202] Depending on the evidence, even a very low prior can be overcome. For example, in a similar case for Julius Caesar, Carrier shows that a prior probability for historicity of only 6% would still result in a posterior (final) probability of nearly 100%. The evidence for Caesar is that good. It is time to consider the evidence for Jesus.

Alternative

Before we do, however, I would like to advantage historicity even further. Because many will disagree with Carrier's low prior for historicity, even if they do not do so on rational grounds, I would like to make some concessions. To both. To Carrier, I concede that the Celestial Jesus theory is plausible, based on the background evidence alone. The Jewish intertestamental literature and belief in a possibly suffering celestial messiah seems to make it very plausible, even expected, that some would eventually invent a figure like Jesus. And to the historicists, I grant the plausibility of the historicity theory, since there is nothing particularly implausible about a Jew named Joshua, charitably ignoring the evidence of Jesus' fit with the Rank-Raglan hero type (from here, and also from the consequent part of the equation)[1203] and the improbability suggested by the exaltation of this particular insignificant person.

In other words, we can admit ignorance and grant equal priors. 50% each. I will continue to offer alternative figures, throughout, generally with the intention of privileging the historicist view.

TL;DR[1204]

Before the most relevant evidence is considered, and based on some of the background knowledge alone, Carrier finds Jesus' historicity to be inherently implausible, thinking the Celestial Jesus theory to be at least twice as likely. Feeling even more generous, I call even odds.

Chapter 7: Primary Sources

Carrier begins with some preliminary remarks: the evidence, *e*, is directly or causally connected with our hypotheses, primary and independent evidence is crucial, and we want to know how likely *e* is, if our hypotheses are true – this is how the consequent probabilities are determined.[1205] Briefly explaining why the main sources to analyse are those writings of the New Testament (all the relevant sources will be discussed over the coming chapters), Carrier explains that he accepts the mainstream dating of the documents, simply because he hasn't "anything better to work with", which somewhat privileges the historicity theory. [1206]

On the Epistles, Carrier states that the many forged (including those of uncertain authorship) documents cannot reliably support historicity, but can work against it, and thinks that 1 Peter may be authentic – scholars often see it as a forgery primarily due to the Gospel-influenced notion that Peter was illiterate.[1207] On the Gospels (and Acts, which is – as is typical in the field – considered as Luke's second volume), Carrier highlights the commonly-known problems: unknown authorship, uncertainty about dating, the fact that they have been meddled with over time; and explains how he will overlook unnecessary and speculative hypothetical sources like Q and John's Signs Gospel.[1208] After all, Bayes' Theorem deals with *actual* evidence.

Turning to the extra-biblical sources, Carrier (like most mainstream scholars) considers the Christian sources to be late (except for maybe 1 Clement), derivative, and unreliable, and generally sees the non-Christian sources in the same light.[1209] Interestingly, after explaining how compromised the sources are (the way they were selected, edited, preserved, and so forth), Carrier generally ignores the possibility that certain passages were interpolated, unless it is already widely accepted, or he can thoroughly argue for it.[1210] Though I think that there are more interpolations than most scholars care to admit, pretending that there aren't can only strengthen this case. In bringing the chapter to a close,

Carrier correctly states that sources that explicitly discuss an early alternative view of Jesus cannot be expected to be preserved, as later Christians have shaped our Bibles, and points to the missing letters of Paul as suspicious.[1211] Of course, if Paul's other letters said something the later Christians did not appreciate, we'd expect them to be suppressed, to be missing.

I was a little disappointed with the chapter, as it didn't discuss in detail what I expected when the term 'primary source' was invoked, particularly when Carrier understands that "the 'evidence' actually includes not just what we have, but also what we don't have".[1212] To me, primary sources are contemporary/eyewitness accounts, of which we have none concerning Jesus, whereas Carrier classifies primary sources as extant sources that are first in the chain of causation among all sources that repeat the same information. Hence, the chapter generally gave a brief overview of the surveyable evidence, which will be thoroughly analysed over the coming chapters. He did include a parting remark about the lack of eyewitness accounts, but stresses that "That alone proves nothing", as it is "true of countless other historical persons".[1213] However, he does make a great point about how these other persons do not suffer from a low prior probability, so that establishing Jesus' historicity requires a higher standard of evidence.[1214] But, giving away the result of the next few chapters' worth of deep analysis, Carrier says, "it is generally *worse*". [1215]

He also passed up on the opportunity to comment at length on the great historicist reliance on imaginary sources. As I have intimated several times now, this 'method' is ridiculous, and if we are to grant historicists the right to appeal to imaginary sources that apparently make Jesus' existence obvious, we must also grant agnostics and mythicists the right to appeal to favourable hypothetical sources. One example is my own *Ephemeris de Paulus* document, which is the oldest and most reliable non-existing source about Jesus, and essentially proves the Celestial Jesus theory to be true. Unless, of course, we rightfully consider imaginary sources to be ridiculous.

Alternative

We might have expected some more mention of the lack of primary source evidence for Jesus. That is, sources that are contemporary and/or from eyewitnesses (Carrier uses the term in the 'earliest we have' sense). I see it as an important issue, as it does affect how reliable the sources we have (which are secondary sources) are, and could, in principle, influence the posterior probabilities. He does not stress the lack of (what I call) primary sources, as this does not prove Jesus' ahistoricity. Of course, Carrier knows that it is relevant, as he claims that the gospel authors were not eyewitness and that we lack contemporary sources for Jesus, throughout his book. I understand why he did not stress this, however, as it would hardly affect the overall calculations, as revealed below.

As I explained earlier, the lack of primary source evidence is nearly 100% expected on the Celestial Jesus theory. After all, the Celestial Jesus we 'support' did not exist. Had we been discussing the historicity of a figure like Julius Caesar, the lack of primary source evidence would definitely yield a low consequent probability. Had we been discussing the Biblical Jesus, the lack of primary source evidence would surely also lead to a very low consequent probability, probably around, if not, 0%. This would be the most significant person of all time, and according to the New Testament, was very famous.[1216] As but one example, surely the darkening of the Sun at Jesus' death would have attracted some attention. [1217]

As for the Historical Jesus, I believe that while the lack of contemporary evidence is nearly 100% on minimal mythicism, it surely would be less so, even if only slightly, on minimal historicity, simply because the Celestial Jesus most certainly didn't exist, while the Historical Jesus is definitely believed to have existed.[1218] Call me unreasonable, but I expect a real figure to leave behind more evidence than a made-up one. However, the Historical Jesus was supposed to be an insignificant figure, that only later was considered very important. So with a mixture of some charity and that pretty valid excuse (which consequently does not actually solve the problem of having no access to reliable primary

sources), I would grant equal consequent probabilities regarding the lack of primary source evidence. 100% each way.

In other words, this is effectively a non-issue, for our current purposes. It is surely an endorsement for Carrier's book, that my most significant criticisms reveal an intent to raise petty objections, which pose no problems whatever to his case. Like a true devil's advocate, I am trying to be as harsh as possible, so as to give the historicity hypothesis – which I obviously am not convinced by – the best chance of success. Compare that to my critiques of Ehrman and Casey, where I needed to hold back, as a thorough discussion of every single error they made would have taken several volumes. The analytical philosopher in me is still tempted to do just that. Furthermore, in this case, my objection is that Carrier has actually been (a little) too favourable to minimal historicity!

TL;DR

No change. With Carrier not adding to his calculations, he still finds the Celestial Jesus theory to be (at least) twice as likely. After factoring in the evidence of the lack of primary sources, I still call even odds.

Chapter 8: Extrabiblical Evidence

We shall try to keep this brief, as I have already discussed the main external sources, noted historicist Bart Ehrman effectively dismissed them, and Maurice Casey hardly seemed to bother with them at all. They are clearly not as important as the Christian sources for Jesus. Now Carrier begins *his* analysis of the non-biblical sources by recognising that various early Christians and Jews, such as the Nazorians (citing Epiphanius and the Jewish Talmud), thought that Jesus had lived around 100 years before the dates implied by the traditional Gospel accounts.[1219] Thinking this almost impossible if Jesus had actually existed, Carrier points out the well-known fact that even the canonical Gospels necessitate discrepancies over Jesus' birth and death, and also that some early Christians thought Jesus died around a decade later (citing Irenaeus).[1220] He supposes that some (i.e. the Gospel writers) would have wanted to place Jesus' later life in the 30's CE as that might be when the Church was founded, just as Romulus was placed into history around the time of the founding of Rome. [1221]

Indeed, this all does seem suspicious; it is as if various Judeo-Christian groups just placed Jesus into history where they wanted/needed him, which is obviously easier to do with a completely fictional character. As this oddity would be more expected of an ahistorical character, Carrier has found his first bit of evidence (apart from that considered for the prior probabilities) that puts the Celestial Jesus theory in front.[1222] While then explaining that the (still quite poor) evidence for the philosopher Socrates is far better than the evidence for Jesus (for example, we have eyewitness accounts of the former), Carrier asserts that "If such is the state of our knowledge of Socrates, our knowledge of Jesus must be regarded a thousand times less."[1223]

He then turns his attention to the poor evidentiary record about early Christians in general, finding it odd that Christians didn't preserve such evidence, and also noting that even Christian critics (like Celsus) are known only through the writings of Christians.[1224] Even more

concerning is the missing portions (*lacunae*) of texts that survived, via Christian hands, such as Hippolytus' volumes on mystery religions, Plutarch's comments on the similarities between Jewish theology and mystery religions, the missing 'crucifixion years' in Tacitus' *Annals*, the missing 'birth years' in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, and the missing volumes of Philo, who supposedly wrote much about Pontius Pilate.[1225] Would the embarrassment of historical silences about Jesus and 'pagan parallels' have driven later, and even medieval, Christians to excise such portions, or simply fail to preserve them? Add to this the possibility of yet more 'convenient losses' and the widely acknowledged forged Josephean passage about Jesus, and Carrier is justifiably suspicious.[1226]

Carrier also finds it odd that for the first 60 or so years of Christianity's existence, the only extant Christian sources are the books that made it into the New Testament, though we can reasonably know that many more existed (such as the missing letters of Paul, and church records), and that 1 Clement follows, with not much else for several decades after that.[1227] Like my thoughts on primary sources, Carrier realises that these problems could be explained away via valid excuses, yet the problem of what we don't have and know remains.[1228] He also highlights that the fact that several of Paul's many letters remain serves as proof that Christians *could* preserve such documents, and so must have intentionally discarded most of the then-available sources.[1229] Despite the obvious implications that all this suggests that there were things about early Christianity – and the historical records – that clearly bothered later Christians (a Celestial Jesus, perhaps?), Carrier almost inexplicably overlooks the impact of this for his calculations.[1230] I say 'almost' because we must recall that Carrier is arguing *a fortiori*. And to be fair, the early Christians may also have had much reason to erase a historical Jesus from the record.

Finally moving on to an in-depth analysis of individual sources, Carrier begins with 1 Clement. He notes that this document, which was probably written in the mid-late first century, says absolutely nothing about a historical Jesus, and like Paul, his sources about Christ are the Jewish scriptures and God's revelations.[1231] Carrier thinks that the document portrays Jesus as a celestial being, whilst also displaying a

complete lack of awareness of the Gospel Jesus. One revealing passage seems very much compatible with the Celestial Jesus theory, whilst making no historical allusions whatsoever:

> The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ was sent from God. And so Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ. Each occurred in an orderly way from the will of God. And so having received their orders and being fully reassured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and persuaded in the word of God, with the full assurance of the holy spirit, they went out spreading the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand (1 Clem. 42.1-4).[1232]

With no mention in this account of Jesus having a ministry and preaching to the masses that the kingdom of God was at hand, and instead describing revelations of Jesus to the apostles who then disseminated the information, it is no wonder that Carrier claims 1 Clement as (at least slightly) favouring minimal mythicism.[1233]

Moving on to the early-mid second century writings of Ignatius of Antioch, the authenticity of which is debated by mainstream scholars, Carrier stresses that Ignatius' obvious belief in the Gospel Jesus as not at all unexpected.[1234] He notes that Ignatius continually stresses the historicity of Jesus, warning against alternative views of Jesus, such as a Docetic Jesus, or perhaps even the Celestial Jesus.[1235] Of course, Ignatius does not appeal to historical facts; he only says that if he is wrong, he is "living a lie, and dying for nothing".[1236] He simply *prefers* the Gospel Jesus. Now it is clear that Ignatius' writings, having been written after the Gospels, cannot reasonably support the historicity thesis, but it might possibly support the alternative.

One Ignatian passage (which could have its origins in an earlier source) refers to Jesus' life being kept hidden from "the Prince of this World",[1237] which strangely aligns with the posited Celestial Jesus of Paul's epistles,[1238] and is incompatible with the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus. After all, *that* Jesus was around for all to see, and even hung out with Satan, on occasion![1239] Finding that something similar is said in the writings of Irenaeus and Justin Martyr (and of course, the *Ascension of Isaiah*), and that this is very hard to explain on the historicity theory but

not at all on the mythicist theory, Carrier judges that this is all at least slightly more probable on the latter theory.[1240]

Carrier quickly dismisses Papias, for his one known book is from the second century and is no longer extant, Eusebius thought him "a man of very little intelligence", and he makes numerous implausible claims, such as his famous comments on the authorship of certain Gospels.[1241] Hegesippus' *Memoirs* fares no better, as it is from the late second century, no longer extant, and also filled with legendary material.[1242] Nevertheless, one passage – about James – portrays Jesus in a manner more suited to the Celestial Jesus theory, so Carrier thinks it is slightly more expected on mythicism.[1243] With the more obscure sources out of the way, Carrier at last addresses the main extrabiblical references that interest Jesus historicists, agnostics, and mythicists. Just as with Ehrman and myself, however, he finds them unhelpful in the overall analysis.

Carrier finds both references to Jesus in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* to be later forgeries, meaning that Josephus never mentioned Jesus Christ, or any other Christians. On the larger passage, which has obviously been tampered with (as all critical scholars agree), Carrier rejects the truncated version offered by scholarly reconstructionists as it makes little sense with the other portions excised,[1244] is not quoted for several centuries, seems to borrow its vocabulary and sequence of content from Luke's gospel, is out of place, is surprisingly short (more space is devoted to far more trivial affairs), and the apparently supportive Arabic version has virtually been proven as deriving from Eusebius, centuries later.[1245] I agree, of course. It is astonishing that scholars could place such great importance on a passage that is obviously forged in part, and could easily be forged in whole.

That now leaves the shorter Josephean passage, which briefly mentions a James, who is the brother of a Jesus, then adds, "called Christ". Obviously, with the first passage dismissed, this passage makes no sense as Josephus never explains who this 'Jesus called Christ' is, and we have little reason to think that he was otherwise well known. But Carrier goes further, presenting numerous arguments to decisively demonstrate that this is an obvious – and likely accidental – revision: centuries go by without

anybody quoting it (Origen's apparent quotations are likely misattributed as even some mainstream scholars agree), the crucial phrase sounds like a speculative footnote (which was later incorporated into the main text), there is no cross-reference to the other passage, the passage is more likely about non-Christian Jews, and the description of James' death does not align with later accounts.[1246] It is more likely that the passage is not discussing Jesus Christ, but Jesus bar Damnaeus, who was mentioned soon after, which means that Josephus doesn't mention Jesus and cannot support his historicity.[1247]

With the most important non-biblical source now eliminated, Carrier focuses on Pliny and Tacitus. He correctly notes that Pliny's reference does nothing for the Historical Jesus, as Pliny only recalls that Christians believed in 'Christ', which is expected on both theories.[1248] Carrier then thinks that the most relevant portion of the Tacitean reference (most concerns Christians, rather than Christ) is an interpolation, for various reasons, but correctly states, like Ehrman and myself, that if authentic, the information in this late reference derives from Christians.[1249] Pliny, a sometime collaborator and close friend of Tacitus, may have been the intermediary here; other reliable sources for the Tacitean reference don't seem likely, as we should then have those to examine.[1250] There is simply nothing useful here. Before moving on, Carrier makes an insightful point about associating Jesus with Pilate:

> … claims that Jesus was celestially crucified by the 'rulers of this world' *during* the reign of Pilate could easily be misunderstood by a half-interested Roman audience as crucified *by* Pilate. Thus, even the 'cosmic crucifixion' of minimal mythicism could so easily be misreported in a historicist fashion that our inability to rule that possibility out further complicates third-hand evidence such as this.[1251]

Carrier has little to say about the Thallus reference, and rightly so, since it is a late third-hand account; he forcefully argues that Thallus did not refer to Jesus, and that Africanus simply assumed that he did.[1252] On Suetonius, Carrier notes that the shorter reference only says that Christians existed, which is not at all unexpected, and the longer reference makes no mention of Christians and Jesus, but discusses Jews (in an odd story that somewhat contradicts Cassius Dio's account) and a fellow named Chrestus who was instigating riots in Rome under Claudius, whilst

also noting that Jesus would not have been alive or in Rome during the reign of Claudius.[1253] And, of course, even a Celestial Jesus can instigate riots, so there is nothing here that supports historicity.

Before finishing the chapter, Carrier has a few things to say about the possible objection that no sources show any objection to "the invention of a historical Jesus".[1254] He says that the mystery religion element should make us expect some secrecy, we are missing texts from the early decades of the movement – including those of opposing sects, the lack of gainsaying accounts of mythical people when they become historicised is actually normal,[1255] and there are actually hints that some may have questioned Jesus' historicity, such as Trypho's "the Christ, if he has indeed been born", with Justin Martyr's reply relying on God's revelations and not historical facts.[1256] Hints that later Christians were actually countering the Celestial Jesus claims of earlier Christians might also be found in canonical epistles like 2 Peter and 1 Timothy, and the non-canonical *Ascension of Isaiah*.[1257]

Referring to the work of Kurt Noll, a theologian and historicist Biblical scholar who considered the possibility of mythicism, Carrier explains that it is common and expected for religions to invent historical characters, as an effective marketing tool.[1258] One revealing quotation:

> As Noll concludes: [T]he data betray a clear evolutionary process from the proclamation of the so-called Jerusalem pillars, through the teachings of Paul, and ultimately into several competing varieties of post-Pauline Christianity. Earlier Christian doctrinal modes went extinct as later ones evolved. The doctrinal mode favoured by the Jerusalem pillars was extinct by the late first century. Although Paul's doctrinal mode was able to survive, it could do so only by evolving significantly new traits, including a conceptualization of a 'historical' Jesus guaranteed by allegedly eyewitness testimonies. This newly invented 'historical' Jesus effectively replaced Paul as the authority behind Paul's doctrinal mode.[1259]

Obviously, claims of revelations can only take you so far, particularly when anybody can make such claims. This Darwinian development seems well proven, with Paul downplaying human sources and stressing the importance of God's revelations, while later epistles like 2 Peter contradict Paul and stress human traditions. As we saw earlier, Origen even criticises those Christians that could not grasp the allegories but

needed ‘literal truths’. Cleverly recognising that it is “necessarily harder to get away with inventing a man’s great and extraordinary fame than to invent a mere man”,[1260] Carrier concludes that the lack of opposition to fabricating Jesus does not count against the probability of mythicism.[1261] I wonder if he is even being too kind, as we could consider that it is intuitively easier to fabricate stories about an invented person than about an actual person, but that would have to overlook all his sound argumentation here.

Since all the extrabiblical evidence either did not favour one theory over the other or slightly favoured minimal mythicism, Carrier calculates the posteriors at around 2:1 odds, favouring the Celestial Jesus theory – the slight differences in probabilities quickly add up.[1262] That everything so far is judged as being perfectly expected on mythicism (or actually, ‘perfectly expected’ in a relative sense – in other words, no less expected than on historicity) may be seen as suspicious by historicists, but the analysis has been fair so far. The hypothesis of minimal mythicism *entails* that later documents reveal a belief in a historicised Jesus, so that sources to that effect do not at all lower the probability of minimal mythicism. On the flip side, it is very difficult to explain away the hints of a Celestial Jesus, if there was a Historical Jesus, and everyone believed it.

Alternative

Carrier has again been charitable, thinking the odds should be around 10:1 or greater, but granting 2:1 instead, favouring mythicism. I shall be even kinder. I am content to strike this all from the record, as we are dealing with late and highly questionable references, so that I – once again – grant even odds, 1:1. Of course, I don’t think we should be so kind, but I continue to be, to make a point that shall become obvious later.

TL;DR

The extrabiblical evidence poses no problems to the theory of minimal mythicism, but poses several problems for minimal historicity, so that

Carrier finds it to be around twice as expected/likely on the former theory. Given the lower prior, things aren't looking rosy for the Historical Jesus. I, however, again called even odds. Because I'm nice.

Chapter 9: The Evidence of Acts

In my opinion Acts is not worth mentioning, as it is a later document that concerns itself with the early Church, and not Jesus' life on Earth. In fact, Jesus appears only at the beginning, in a highly mythological tale which merely piggybacks off Luke' gospel, that ends with him being assumed into Heaven. Nevertheless, Carrier begins his analysis of what is effectively the second part of Luke's gospel, by recognising that even mainstream scholars see Acts as "all but discredited as a work of apologetic historical fiction".[1263] When it comes to historical sources used by Luke in composing Acts, we can only reasonably infer that Josephus was appealed to, and only for background material.[1264] Employing mainstream biblical scholarship, Carrier then explains that literary influences – such as Homer's Odyssey – are obvious, questions why the New Testament's Acts document should be looked upon more favourably than other Acts documents (which are generally wholly fabricated), and points to its many implausible claims.[1265]

Despite its lack of historical value, Carrier just can't help himself and discovers something unsettling: there is absolutely no mention in Acts of the expected outrage over Jesus' being missing (he was a convicted criminal), or of the 'fact' that Jesus' believers were hiding and caring for a fugitive, or of the Jewish authorities wanting to 'finish the job'.[1266] Even stranger is the fact that Acts, which documents the activities of the early Church, from chapter 2 onwards, seems to ignore all the people associated with the Gospel Jesus (like Pontius Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea, and Mary Magdalene) and forgets that Jesus had any relatives.[1267] Finding all this to be very unexpected, even for an obviously fictional document, Carrier declares that there is evidence here that slightly favours mythicism.[1268]

Also troubling is that the stories of the trials of Paul portrayed in Acts make absolutely no explicit mention of a Historical Jesus. It is also odd that these stories are completely compatible with a Celestial Jesus. Carrier explains that Paul's defence seems to rely solely on divine revelation and

Jewish scripture (sound familiar?), rather than an appeal to historical facts, and that Paul's accusers don't seem to realise that he associated with an executed felon or is somewhat of an accessory to an escaped convict; this leads Carrier to again declare that herein is evidence that is slightly more expected on mythicism.[1269]

He finds similar issues with the description of the trial of the (bizarrely) previously unknown Stephen, wherein the defense focussed on "the whole biblical history of the Jews" rather than "the miracles, ministry, trial and fate of Jesus", but is happy to generally overlook this.[1270] Carrier interestingly notes that Luke may have had access to some earlier source describing the trial of a Paul who only believed in a Celestial Jesus, as this somewhat conflicts with other passages in Acts about Paul that make far more explicit claims about Paul's believing in a more Earthly Jesus (the latter of which is not at all unexpected on either theory). I can imagine the likes of Ehrman objecting to Carrier's inexplicit and ultimately unimportant appeal to a hypothetical source. Oh, the irony!

Carrier then moves to dismiss the possibility that Acts should be considered somewhat reliable due to the underlying Aramaic source material, that is apparently made obvious by the many Semitisms therein. Apart from the obvious notion that an Aramaic source does not guarantee authenticity, Carrier correctly states that Semitisms could simply reveal a Semiticised Greek rather than an underlying Semitic source, and that this is supported by the New Testament's reliance on the Septuagint, which is, of course, written in Semiticised Greek.[1271] Finally, Carrier concedes that if Acts is a fiction that was written in total ignorance, it has no bearing on our calculations, but if 'Luke' had some access to earlier sources, then the little mythicist hints found therein would slightly favour the Celestial Jesus theory.[1272]

Alternative

Based on the assumption that Luke used some earlier sources in constructing Acts, anything about Jesus' earthly existence is unsurprising on both theories, while the few hints to a Celestial Jesus certainly do

damage to the historicity hypothesis. But, due to my everlasting charitable mood, I am willing to take up Carrier's earlier-offered lifeline; namely that Acts is written in total ignorance. In this way, we can declare that there is no advantage to either theory, so that we can call even odds, or dismiss Acts altogether (same result). Note that, so far, all of Carrier's priors and 'groupings of consequents' favour minimal mythicism, while all of my figures are neutral.

TL;DR

The evidence of Acts poses no problems to the theory of minimal mythicism, but poses several small problems for minimal historicity, so that Carrier finds it to be slightly supportive of mythicism. Happy to see Acts as an original fiction written in total ignorance, I call even odds.

Chapter 10: The Evidence of the Gospels

We're ready to take on the big dogs. At last, Carrier shall tackle the main sources for Jesus' existence. He begins by revealing how the non-canonical *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* lifts teachings from the non-Christian *Eugnostos the Blessed* (which – like earlier discussed Jewish documents – outlines "an esoteric doctrine of Jewish theology concerning the firstborn celestial Son of God, called the Savior and Son of Man"), and places them on the lips of the Gospel Jesus.[1273] This is not unique, with the same phenomenon occurring with other religious figures, such as Moses (i.e. the 'Oral Torah'). After supposing that this could also happen with the heavenly Jesus' 'revelatory' teachings, Carrier continues:

> Inventing historical narratives in which to place or adapt sayings was commonplace in ancient biography, even in general, but especially in faith literature (Element 44). That was actually the norm. So the question is: Are the Gospels fictional constructs, like the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* and Plutarch's *Life of Romulus*? In other words, are they just myths? Or are they some kind of historical records we can rely on to prove Jesus existed?[1274]

He then explains that 'myth' is not a genre and that even historical biographies, like Plutarch's *Life of Romulus*, can be entirely mythical (as in, factually untrue, though symbolically meaningful).[1275] Carrier asserts that if the canonical Gospels are mythical, then the numerous differences and contradictions are easily explained, and we can give up on trying to find historical truths within, further noting that myths can be borrowed and changed, with the differences often being the very reasons for adapting the myth.[1276] Carrier asserts that if the Gospels often meaningfully copy prior myths, contain a lot of historical improbabilities (natural or supernatural), and lack external corroboration for its key elements, they should be assumed to be totally mythical.[1277]

Referring to more mainstream scholars that confirm that "the Gospels are primarily and pervasively mythical", like John Crossan and Randel Helms, Carrier lists the many problems the Gospels pose: they do not name or critique their sources, they do not admit or explain the changes they made, they do not explain the authors' qualifications, they are not

written by known eyewitnesses, and they look like fictional biographies.[1278] Even worse, as the background evidence revealed, the very core of the Gospel narrative can be derived from still-existing pre-Christian Jewish writings; there is no need to posit Jewish and Pagan sources that are no longer extant.[1279] Despite most critical scholars realising all this, they still search for a 'historical core', generally by using the Criteria of Authenticity, which are becoming increasingly maligned by mainstream New Testament authors.[1280] With the Gospels already looking increasingly unhelpful, Carrier turns his attention to the earliest and most important: Mark.

Carrier begins his attack on the Gospel of Mark by realising that the story of Pilate releasing Barabbas instead of Jesus is woefully improbable; as if the Romans would let a murderous rebel go free.[1281] He sees the story as Mark's own parable emulating the scapegoat ritual at Yom Kippur, wherein Mark asks believers to reject the Jewish sins and to embrace Christ's eternal salvation of atonement.[1282] With even the important early Christian Origen agreeing with this allegorical meaning, and Barabbas and Jesus both being 'sons of the father' (the former by name) Carrier finds the story to be an obvious fiction, and cites several other scholars who agree.[1283]

Turning to the crucifixion scene, Carrier notes the many Markan passages that "were mined" from Jewish texts such as Psalms, Zechariah, and Isaiah 53.[1284] Interestingly, Carrier also thinks that the Aramaic words coming from Jesus' mouth in Mark's primarily Greek gospel originated in a Jewish targum of the Psalms. This seems to contradict the work of various scholars trying to argue for hypothetical foundational Aramaic sources, which as we saw, is not decisive anyway. He then appeals to the work of Randel Helms in declaring Jesus' resurrecting a girl in Mark 5:41 as an obvious fiction that is a rewrite of a similarly fictional story about Elisha in 2 Kings 4.[1285]

Finding the sustained ignorance of Jesus' disciples to be unrealistic and reminiscent of the incomprehension of the mythical Odysseus' crew (and that of the Jews in Exodus), Carrier appeals to the work of mainstream scholars in identifying many deliberate literary devices in

Mark, such as ring composition, mirroring of related events (including reversals) around the central Sea Narrative, and parallels with older Jewish scriptures.[1286] Of particular interest is Carrier's realising that Mark starts off with Jesus commanding us to believe in "the gospel",[1287] without explaining what it is in the first few chapters of Mark; he only discusses it after the Sea Narrative, which includes Jesus using parables and even explaining how parables conceal truths in fictitious stories.[1288] A hint, perhaps?

Appealing to Jewish custom, and building on Jesus being associated with Passover and Yom Kippur, Carrier also finds it far too coincidental that Mark places Jesus' resurrection (the earlier Paul having already associated Christ with the first fruits of the resurrection) on the Day of Firstfruits, whilst also noting that trials and executions could not be conducted on holy days.[1289] In other words, the crucial latter parts of Mark's gospel have no historical credibility, while fabrication and myth explains all. Carrier then discusses the numerous parallels between Mark's Jesus and Josephus' Jesus ben Ananias, which further suggests that "Mark is making everything up" and that Mark wrote after the Jewish War (and thus, after Paul).[1290] He then refers to the work of George Nickelsburg, finding that the Markan Passion Narrative is not only typical of fictional heroes, but is also typical of *Jewish* fictional heroes.[1291]

Again referring to mainstream Biblical research (who says mythicism is fringe?), with one such scholar going "on to show that the whole of Mark 11-16 contains an escalating system of symbols and teachings abut replacing the temple cult", Carrier highlights some of Mark's many intercalated – and clearly allegorical – stories; that is, parts of stories wrapping around other stories.[1292] Carrier goes on:

> Many more examples could be produced, but you get the picture. Again and again we see the same indicators – such as miracles and improbabilities, literary constructs, symbolic narratives, artificial structures, rewrites of biblical tales, emulations of mythic plots – in every scene of Mark's Gospel. This is what myth looks like, not history.[1293]

He then appeals to Dennis MacDonald, a Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins who basically sees the Gospel of Mark (and Acts, which is commonly thought to have been written by Luke) as allegorical

fictions, borrowing heavily from Homer's writings. MacDonald suggested that "Mark and Luke wrote not to convert their readers but to provide the burgeoning Christian movement a literary narrative to shape its identity", which is exactly, as MacDonald further explains, what (the Greek) Homer and (the Roman) Virgil had done, with the latter transforming the former's writings to suit.[1294]

After briefly explaining how the four – contradicting – canonical Gospels would have been carefully selected by the eventually triumphant Christian sect so as to include several Christian communities (but not too many that unity would be unachievable), Carrier discusses example after example of Mark's borrowing from Homer's writings, to the extent that (as many mainstream scholars have already recognised) Mark's gospel implausibly contains many tales of sea voyages and sailors, though it is set in a landlocked territory.[1295] Again implying that Mark is simply writing parables (recall Mark 4:9-12), Carrier rightly states that everything in Mark's gospel is either "more likely a fiction than a historical tradition" or "it's just as likely either way".[1296] In other words, Mark should not be used to assert Jesus' historicity.

In bringing his discussion of Mark to a close, Carrier discusses yet more examples of obvious allegories and historical fictions, and intriguingly raises the possibility that there are hints of 'secrets' (like the number of loaves and baskets in Mark 8:19-21, and similarly, the 153[1297] fish in John 21:7-12) that we still don't understand.[1298] One such oddity concerns the *unnamed* woman of Mark 14 who Jesus virtually commanded to be *memorialised*. Carrier asserts that there must be some allegorical meaning to her needlessly smashing an expensive jar of absurdly expensive oil, for Jesus' apparent benefit. The many hidden or allegorical meanings might be mere 'coincidence', but it could also be that the story was intentionally constructed to convey such meanings. After pointing out that even Jesus' named relatives don't indicate historicity, as even mythical characters have relatives and genealogies, Carrier concludes that we cannot know that anything in Mark is historically authentic; we need to look elsewhere.[1299] It would be a shame if the Matthean analysis would yield the same result.

Beginning his critique of Matthew's gospel by noting its extensive 'borrowing' from Mark, which is universally acknowledged, Carrier notes that Matthew adds an outrageous nativity narrative that "no reasonable historian" would regard as authentic, and a similarly dodgy resurrection-appearance narrative, with the material in between being revised.[1300] Whilst also noting the possibility that anything Matthew adds is fictional, and that Matthew intended to improve and 'Judaise' Mark's Gentile-friendly gospel, which is also widely accepted in mainstream scholarship, Carrier finds that Matthew's doing this to Mark's gospel instead of completely writing his own is quite telling.[1301] Why speculate about Matthew having access to independent sources? And, as I have mentioned throughout, the appeal to hypothetical sources is, frankly, unscholarly.

Carrier then provides an example of how ridiculous (i.e. historically implausible) some of Matthew's 'improvements' are, such as having Jesus riding on two donkeys in Matthew 21:1-9, so that the link to the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 would be more explicit.[1302] Another example is Matthew's first chapter declaring Jesus' name to be called Immanuel (Matthew 1:23), "God is with us", which Jesus is never called, *ever*, but which parallels Jesus words in Matthew's ending: "I am with you" (Matthew 28:20).[1303] With Matthew's willingness to change the story as he saw fit, caring not for historical accuracy, Carrier wonders, along with the more mainstream Marcus Borg, if Matthew's whole gospel is 'prophecy historicised' rather than 'history remembered'.[1304]

He then explains, again by appealing to the work of mainstream scholars, that while Matthew destroys Mark's "beautiful literary structure", Matthew constructed his own; for instance, Matthew's gospel is a "large chiastic superstructure", which is something quite prevalent in ancient fiction.[1305] But what if Matthew simply rearranged actual facts, creatively? Carrier has an answer ready: Matthew would then clearly care more for his symbolic literary structure than about the facts, and it is very unlikely that history provided him with the facts he required – he would have had to invent some things. We also know that he borrowed from Mark, and we know that Mark made stuff up too![1306]

Carrier wonders why we should not perceive Mark and Matthew as inventing everything (and that goes for hypothetical sources too), when we know they did invent so much. He also notes that even the narratives associated with Jesus seem to be created by them – we certainly find no earlier record of them (such as in Paul or 1 Clement).[1307] Carrier then, again by using the conclusions of more mainstream scholars such as Dale Allison, continues to reveal examples of literary structure and Old Testament influence (particularly the Septuagint), and notes that Matthew turns Jesus "into a new Moses", which is an surely indicator of fiction. [1308] He concludes that, just as with Mark, Matthew is mythmaking, and we simply cannot know if there are any historical facts therein.[1309] So, it too must be struck from the record. On to Luke.

With the Gospel of John arriving later and being so overtly theological, and the fact that a case for the historicity of Jesus relying solely on the Epistles would be catastrophic, much now rests on the shoulders of Luke – a person, who as we saw in Carrier's chapter on Acts, happily makes stuff up whenever he feels like it. This is as good a time as ever for Carrier to note that Luke actually portrays his version as historical, though Luke doesn't weigh up facts, fails to name his sources, and simply further expands on Mark and Matthew.[1310] The latter point actually reveals Luke's introductory claim as following 'what was handed on to him' as a bald-faced lie.

(Of course, many historicists think Luke used Q instead of Matthew, as if that helps, but there is no evidence for that, it is simpler to assume he used Matthew's gospel, and as we earlier saw, there are even mainstream historicist scholars who dispute Q's existence. On the other hand, Doherty, a mythicist, is adamant that Q existed. Carrier is fairly certain it did not. I tend to agree with the latter, but even when not so assertive, I point out that it is unnecessary, and hence violates Ockham's Razor.)

After providing several examples of Luke's redacting Matthew, Carrier notes that many scholars think that Luke-Acts is an attempt to reconcile the Gentile (i.e. Markan community) and Torah-observant (i.e. Matthean community) sects, which sounds reasonable, particularly when it was selected by the eventually successful stream of Christianity, and that Luke

seeks to portray Christianity as law-abiding and respectable.[1311] Carrier then discusses the many parallels between Luke's material and that of earlier Jewish documents, as well as that of pagan myths, and notes that while Luke's gospel seems more haphazard, many mainstream scholars have identified literary structures therein.[1312]

Also noting scholars' inability to know for certain what was contained in the original manuscript, Carrier stresses Luke's tendency to fabricate, and rightly asserts – particularly when more 'historical' though unimportant details are borrowed from Josephus – that we simply cannot know if Luke's gospel does contain authentic historical material about Jesus.[1313] As with Mark and Matthew, there is nothing in Luke that is "any less likely on myth than on historicity", so it "has no evidential value".[1314] Oh dear. We simply can't build a case for the Historical Jesus on the Epistles alone, so John's gospel better be awesome.

Of course, John is even worse than the synoptic gospels. Carrier notes that scholars are divided over whether John relies on the other three canonical gospels,[1315] but he is right to assume that they are, as there is much evidence of this, and hypothetical foundational sources obviously cannot tell us anything. Finding John to be overly propagandistic in trying to constantly provide miraculous evidence of Jesus' lofty station, Carrier sees John's author/s (later edits are virtually certain) as even worse than Luke's in that he/they/she freely changes things and moves stories around, to the extent that there are two endings (John 20:30-31 and John 21:24-25), and a well-known interpolation in the story of the adulteress (John 7:53-8:11).[1316] Carrier goes through several examples revealing John to be an absolute joke, such as Jesus entering Judea (John 3:22) when he already was in Judea (see chapter 2), and Jesus saying "let us go from here" (John 14:31) but then rambling on for several chapters so that they only go much later (John 18:1).[1317]

Even still, Carrier notes – again via the work of mainstream scholars[1318] – evidence of intentional structure and Old Testament parallels, leading him to declare, "This is a literary construct. It is not history."[1319] Referring to the work of respected classicist Alan Cameron, Carrier notes here that this sort of fabrication of sources was

commonplace in ancient mythography, as was the addition of vivid details (cf. my earlier discussion on the criterion of vividness). Attention then turns to the identity of this gospel's (claimed) main source, the unnamed 'Beloved Disciple'.[1320] Traditionally seen as John son of Zebedee, numerous scholars are in disagreement, offering alternative authors such as Lazarus, who is the only one in John's gospel to be called Jesus' 'Beloved'.[1321] That Lazarus, previously unknown to Gospel authors, plays such a key role in the story, with Jews plotting to kill Jesus since he resurrected Lazarus (John 11:53),[1322] is itself found by Carrier to be highly indicative of fiction.[1323]

Also aware of the symbolism elsewhere in John, such as the story of "a man who was accused of violating the thirty-ninth Sabbath prohibition, violating it in his thirty-ninth year of illness",[1324] Carrier finally declares:

> This is myth, not history. However much John colors his account with historical trivia about old Jerusalem, he is still just making all this up.[1325]

Since the canonical gospels are full of fictions and myths, contain no confirmable historical information that is central to the story, show little to no regard for historical accuracy, and since their literary structures contradict the possibility of simple eyewitness reports or collected hearsay, Carrier concludes that they, apart from the information he already used to construct the prior probabilities, are equally expected on both theories – they have no effect on the probability that Jesus existed.[1326] This refusal to 'double dip' simply reveals his consistency and intellectual honesty. I wondered if he would factor in as evidence the historicising trend I mentioned earlier, and this just about covers it, as the Gospels are the later sources.

Carrier also notes that the Gospel authors are more concerned with their own interests, offering no acknowledgment or proper critique of previous writers; they just make "Jesus say or do whatever they want".[1327] With the chapter coming to a close, I would have liked to see more on the woeful methods used by historicists to tease out truths from the Gospels, particularly their appeal to imaginary sources, as well as a

thorough discussion of Mark as an allegorisation of Paul. This is just nitpicking, however, since a single book can't deal with absolutely every point, and I have dealt with those issues in this book. Finally, realising that Gospel authors not interested in history don't require a Historical Jesus, Carrier asks us to "stop thinking we can use them as historical sources", and asserts that the Gospels cannot prove Jesus' historicity; but nor can they disprove it.[1328] The battle for the Gospels is over. The battle for the Epistles is about to begin.

Alternative

Carrier 'sort of' eliminates the Gospels as not supportive of either theory. But that is not truly accurate, as he earlier used parts of the Gospels to construct his prior probabilities, which favoured mythicism. In other words, Carrier *does* see the Gospels as favouring the Celestial Jesus hypothesis, since they portray Jesus in a manner typical of (often religious) fiction. I offer another option. I too will say that the Gospels do not affect the calculation, on the consequent stage, but additionally, I shall (charitably) claim that they do not affect the calculation *at all*. Recall that my alternative calculations started with equal prior probabilities. The reason for my (ongoing) benevolence and for accepting the seemingly counter-intuitive notion that the Gospels cannot support Jesus' historicity is effectively the same: such documents are expected on both theories.

If all mythicists did was say that 'Jesus did not exist', then the Gospels would seemingly make them look quite silly. However, the theory of the Celestial Jesus is far more sophisticated and predicts that documents like the Gospels would eventually appear. Minimal historicity says that the Historical Jesus evolved into the Biblical/Gospel Jesus, but minimal mythicism similarly says that the Celestial Jesus (or rather, the belief in) evolved into the Biblical/Gospel Jesus. And which Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels? The Gospel Jesus, obviously. So while it is true that the Gospels do not portray the 'life' of the Celestial Jesus, they also do not portray the life of the Historical Jesus!

Both camps agree that the true story has evolved, and that that evolution resulted in the Gospels. The Gospels contain copious amounts of myth, and (at least what is purported to be) history. *This mixture of myth and 'history' is expected on both theories*. We expect this on the theory that Jesus was a historical figure who became mythicised, and we expect this on the theory that Jesus was a mythical figure that became historicised. Thus, I call even odds. Again.

TL;DR

The Gospels are simply awful as historical sources. They are obviously fictional tales, though that does not mean that Jesus did not exist. It just means that they can't really support the theory that he did. For slightly different reasons – I also see them as terrible sources, but 'concede' that they are equally expected on both theories – Carrier and I find that the Gospels don't affect the calculations at this stage. Carrier's ongoing calculations are still supportive of mythicism, while mine are still neutral.

Chapter 11: The Evidence of the Epistles

How did it come to this?[1329] The only remaining viable sources say virtually nothing about Jesus' sojourns on Earth and are written by forgers and/or sincere believers – possibly mentally disabled – claiming to know about Jesus through 'revelations'. I concluded my critique of Carrier's previous chapter by stating that the Gospels can be overlooked as they are the sorts of documents we would expect to later appear, on both theories – and even this was a charitable 'concession' (I actually agree that there is information in the Gospels that supports the idea of Jesus' non-existence). This point is massive. If scholars agree with this, and any objective scholar should, then that eliminates historicists' main sources for extracting truths about the Historical Jesus. They can no longer do this once they accept that the Gospels are also reasonably predicted on the Celestial Jesus theory. So it really does come down to the Epistles, especially Paul, whether they like it or not. And as even they must recognise, Paul doesn't give us a time or even location of Jesus' allegedly earthly career, even if they think he does refer to an earthly Jesus. Basically, if they think this has a happy ending, they haven't been paying attention.

Carrier begins expressing how odd it is that Paul's letters, compared to those of ancient historians, contain so little historical information about the central figure discussed therein.[1330] Somehow, Paul's audiences were only concerned with "doctrine and rules of conduct, never the far more interesting subject of how the Son of God lived and died", despite the obvious fact that doctrinal disputes could easily have been resolved by appealing to what Jesus really said and did.[1331] Before going into the details about how much the Epistles support the mythicist view, Carrier stresses the fact that for a proper probabilistic analysis, we must not ask what Paul might have meant, but must assume, in turn, each theory to be true, and then determine *how likely this evidence would be* on that theory's being true – of course, historicists generally never do the latter.[1332]

Carrier explains that in the more than 300 references to Jesus in Paul's seven authentic letters, Paul does not mention even one single fact that unambiguously "connects Jesus with an earthly life".[1333] Indeed, Paul is talking about a celestial Jesus, which I must admit is generally expected. He is apparently (if we take the Gospels seriously) talking about Jesus post-resurrection. Without the Gospel assumptions, however, and even with them, it is bizarre that no clear mention of Jesus' earthly career is ever made by Paul. Despite Paul's obsession with Jesus, he, his Christian allies, and his opponents, do not seem to care one iota for information about the Earthly Jesus.[1334]

It is as if he didn't exist at all! Correctly recognising that bizarre = unexpected = infrequent = improbable, Carrier demands that historicists explain why Paul only ever claims to know about Jesus through "*private revelations*" and "*hidden messages in scripture*"; the simplest explanation is that there never was a Historical Jesus, only a revealed, Celestial Jesus.[1335] Carrier also notes here that the indifference shown by these Christians seems to counter the oft-made claim that early Christians (i.e. the gospel writers) sought to accurately document the life of Jesus. Indeed, they seem more concerned about doctrine and authority.

Brushing off the common – and possibly correct – excuse that Paul's letters are generally only concerned with specific issues, Carrier asserts that it is absurd that there were no 'specific issues' relating to Jesus' earthly life, and that even incidental mentions do not occur, despite Paul's incidental mentions of relative trivialities such as that Christians will eventually judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3).[1336] One such incidental mention that I have recently thought of could be something like, "I spoke with Peter (Galatians 1:18), who still feels guilty about lying to that nameless girl about his associations with Jesus (John 18:13-27)."

Another might concern Pilate's role in Jesus' death. Pilate is mentioned in 1 Timothy 6:13-16, but that epistle is not genuinely Pauline, and may date to the second century. Now listing every possible example is impossible and futile, with each able to be explained away by historicists; it is the lack of such incidental historical details as a whole that is conspicuous. Note that this line of argumentation effectively deals with

the similar excuse that such early Christians lived in a ‘high context’ culture, so didn’t need everything about Jesus repeated to them. And that desperate excuse makes a mockery of the abundant evidence that there were many and contradicting stories about Jesus’ life. Surely, on the historicist view, many early Christians would have demanded clarification of some of the most basic facts concerning Jesus’ Earthly career. It is odd that they don’t seem bothered. It is almost as if, the many and conflicting details about the Gospel Jesus’ life appeared much later…

This is all sound, but isn’t Paul equally disinterested in details about the Celestial Jesus? Carrier ably responds, recognising that such details were kept somewhat secret (and I must add, increasingly expected to be ‘fuzzy’ and sparse), and not directly related to earthly affairs, which is what Paul’s letters concerned – the same excuse/s obviously cannot be used for an earthly Jesus.[1337] Carrier also notes how even more strange this is when we consider that eyewitnesses would still have been around and running the church. Also recall that the Gospel authors are even more temporally disconnected than Paul, by decades, yet seem more interested in and knowledgeable about the historical details (this is relative, of course, since even they know very little).

Citing the more mainstream Gerd Lüdemann as supporting the view that Paul cannot bear witness to the historical existence of Jesus, and noting Lüdemann’s “surprise” at this, Carrier declares this improbable (surprising = unexpected = improbable) on minimal historicity, but totally expected on minimal mythicism.[1338] Other mainstream scholars more or less share Carrier’s and Lüdemann’s concerns, such as Margaret Barker, Helmut Koester, Kurt Noll, and also Nikolaus Walter, who concluded that many of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels were fabricated out of the sayings of Paul (and Walter is not alone in thinking this).[1339]

Considering the hypothesis of minimal historicity, Carrier also finds it improbable that the likes of Peter would accept Paul – who claimed he was ‘chosen’ by the risen Jesus via revelation – as an apostle without the latter having actually run with Jesus’ crew (note that unlike the Gospels, the Epistles don’t actually elevate certain ‘apostles’ as special ‘disciples’). In other words, Peter sees Paul as his equal, because neither of them hung out

with an Earthly Jesus. They all knew the Celestial Jesus through revelations. Carrier finds that this fact deals with the common apologetic argument that Paul avoids historical details so as to conceal the fact that he is not an eyewitness.[1340] He also notes that if this were Paul's weakness, he would have had to address this, head on. After all, he wasn't writing for us, thousands of years later; he was writing to Christians that may have doubted his authority.

Evidently, the other Christians and apostles of the day, didn't seem to care about Paul's spurious qualifications. And that is weird. And weird = unexpected = improbable. Carrier notes that Galatians 1-2 reveals how "the Galatians only trusted direct revelation", which "makes no sense on anything but minimal mythicism", and correctly asserts that revelation would only be so crucially important if there were no witnesses to Jesus' earthly career.[1341] Carrier also brushes off the notion that Paul felt inferior to the so-called "super-apostles" on account of his not having known an Earthly Jesus. Because in fact, Paul does all they can do, and only ever bemoans his relative failing as a poor speaker (2 Corinthians 11:6).[1342]

Finding that all this opposes Jesus' historicity, he then seeks to turn his attention to the few verses that apparently 'imply' that Paul knows of an Earthly Jesus.[1343] It is truly a sad state of affairs if the case for the Historical Jesus rests on a few ambiguous or even interpolated verses in Paul's writings. First, however, Carrier intends to deal with the non-Pauline epistles. Starting with the epistles by the so-called pillars of the church, Carrier finds that they do not help the case for the Historical Jesus, either. James and 1 Peter (also Jude) are similarly silent about an Earthly Jesus, which seems somewhat rectified by the forged 2 Peter and the forged epistles of John.[1344]

Somehow Jude claims to be the brother of James, but neither claims to be the brother of Jesus, which seems very odd if they were Jesus' biological brothers. Surely they could have benefitted immensely by name-dropping the most famous and beloved person in the world. Ever. Now Carrier notes that Jude 17 indicates that "the words of Jesus only came to be communicated to the world *through the apostles*", just as in 1

Clement. Furthermore, James bizarrely "imagines that *all* Christians have 'seen' Jesus die (just like Clement did) and implies Jesus has never been on earth before", and, as with Paul, "says things that *later* appear on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels".[1345] This is all more probable on minimal mythicism.

1 Peter presents similar problems: Peter describes himself as an 'apostle' (1 Peter 1:1) and not a 'disciple'; appeals to scripture and revelation (1:10-12); shows no knowledge of Jesus' recent activities on Earth;[1346] fails to quote Jesus when you might expect him to; describes Jesus' appearance as a 'manifestation' (1:20); refers to a future 'coming' (and not a 'second coming', à la James, 2:12); appears to only know about the crucifixion from Isaiah 53 (2:22-25); curiously declares that earthly authorities are sent by God to punish evildoers (and thus they should be obeyed, 2:13-14) as if he has no clue what happened to Jesus, who was certainly no evildoer according to the Gospels; describes an *Ascension of Isaiah*-like (i.e. Celestial Jesus) mini-gospel (3:18-4:6); and claims that he witnessed Christ's suffering (5:1), which means the Gospels are lying (as Peter was not present at the crucifixion), or Peter 'saw' Jesus in the same way that Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23-25) and James (cf. James 5:11) did. [1347]

Quite clearly, these seven non-Pauline epistles, namely James, 1 Peter, Jude, and also the forged epistles 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John, better support the mythicist view, particularly when taken as a whole. The forged epistles that react against alternative portrayals of Jesus are overlooked as they are, well, forged, and such reactions are expected on both theories. [1348] It is worth noting, and Carrier does, that the forged epistles somewhat eliminate the possible objection around the apparent lack of negative reactions to early beliefs about a mythical Jesus. These, and other Christian writings, are very critical of 'alternative' Christians who believe in 'a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached'.[1349]

Back on Paul's letters, and recalling that Paul says he knows what he knows due to divine revelation, Carrier asserts that the "statements of the gospel 'kerygma', the core doctrine" work just as well, or better (since they omit historical details), on minimal mythicism, such as 1 Corinthians

15:1-8, Romans 1:1-6, and Philemon 2:5-11; the latter of which describes an *Ascension of Isaiah*-like scenario, alludes to Jesus being found and misidentified (i.e. by the demons, as in the *Ascension*), and possibly indicates that Jesus was given his name *after* his death.[1350] Moving to the likely-forged Colossians and the certainly-forged Ephesians, Carrier finds them to be devoid of information on the Historical Jesus, and suggests that the former (Colossians 1:12-27) describes a "celestial being doing magical things in a supernatural realm, whose deeds and teachings in life (if any there were) are completely absent and somehow of no relevance to Christian belief".[1351] This is strange = unusual = infrequent = improbable; more evidence against historicity.

Carrier takes another detour from Paul to the anonymous book of Hebrews. As with other early epistles, the Hebrews author portrays a Celestial Jesus, and shows no knowledge of the destruction of the Jewish Temple, or the Gospel accounts, despite writing almost wholly about Jesus.[1352] Carrier wastes no time in getting to Hebrews 8:1-5, which indisputably portrays a Celestial Jesus, and hints that Jesus had not been on Earth.[1353] It also supports the view that there are things on Earth (perhaps like the priests, and like animal sacrifices) that are mere copies of things in outer space (perhaps like the high priest, Jesus, who was the perfect and celestial sacrifice). Turning to Hebrews 9:11-10:18, it is made very obvious that a divine sacrifice was necessary, in a divine temple ("the one not made with hands"), and anything Jesus 'says' clearly comes from direct revelation or the Jewish scriptures, rather than contemporary historical sources.[1354] Carrier also explains that the 'second coming' referred to in the passage is really just a 'coming' (actually 'appearing'), as the first was via revelation.

Effectively going thorough the entire book of Hebrews, Carrier meticulously demonstrates that there is a great lack of knowledge concerning the Gospel Jesus, despite the author claiming that she/he has much to say about Jesus (Hebrews 5:11-12), and further notes that everything therein that seems somewhat 'historical' is ambiguous and works just as well on mythicism.[1355] Particularly startling is Hebrews 12:25 and its context, which indicates that the Jews were warned 'on Earth', by Moses, and will be warned 'from heaven', by God. It is also

curious that the miracles of Moses are mentioned, and, unexpectedly, Jesus' miracles are not.[1356] Where is Jesus, and specifically, where is the Earthly Jesus?! The answer to this question might lie with Jesus' ahistoricity, and the earlier discussed tendency for the New Testament texts, particularly the Gospels, to portray Jesus as the 'new Moses'.

Thus finding that Hebrews is yet another early Christian document that supports minimal mythicism, Carrier raises a marvellous point about 'Celestial Jesus' documents: we would expect that more explicit texts would have been *produced*, but they surely would not have been *preserved* – somewhat ambiguous texts like Hebrews, and certain letters of Paul, were always going to be more likely preserved by the later orthodox Christians.[1357] Considering Paul's letters, recall that some (many?) of them are missing. Mayhap they made the belief in the Celestial Jesus far too explicit. Also recall my point about how historicists just assume that hypothetical foundational sources support historicity. They could just as easily support mythicism.

Properly back on Paul, Carrier intends to defend the mythicist interpretation of the epistles, starting with the things Jesus supposedly said. Recognising that Paul either uses his own words that are later attributed (plagiarised) to Jesus in the *later* Gospels or gives credit to the revelatory Jesus in Heaven, Carrier notes that Paul never appeals to an eyewitness, and indicates that Jesus didn't teach the Jews on Earth. That's the job of the Apostles, who are the only ones who have 'heard' Jesus; that is to say, only they have received the Lord's teachings, and ought to share them (Romans 10:14-18).[1358] Indeed, Paul's belief that "the preaching of Jesus Christ" is known by revelation and scripture (Romans 16: 25-26) is perfectly expressed in 1 Corinthians 12, where we explicitly see Paul talking to the revelatory/Celestial Jesus.[1359] When Paul clearly refers to secret messages in the Bible and his own hallucinations, and never appeals to historical sources, it is really overreaching to suppose that Paul is sharing the teachings of an Earthly, Historical Jesus.

That even later Christians found revelatory teachings authoritative is revealed by the late and obviously fabricated book of Revelation, "where we find the dead Jesus dictating whole letters from heaven (Rev. 1-3)".

[1360] Realising that sayings of Jesus could just as easily come from revelations/hallucinations, Jewish scripture, and Pagan sources, Carrier provides numerous examples where Paul would be expected to or actually seems to quote Jesus, without explicitly doing so, and posits that simple sayings in earlier writings get "expanded into more elaborate teachings, parables and stories in the Gospels".[1361] Carrier also finds it suspicious that Paul ignores Jesus' favourite method of teaching: the parable. It seems that Jesus' famous parables were not yet invented.

Given all this, it seems quite plausible that *everything* in the Gospels is 'fabricated' and simply builds on earlier material. Carrier ends by asserting that it is "hard to explain how Jesus could have been so rapidly worshiped as a demigod if he hardly ever taught anything worth repeating".[1362] This might allude to the old historicists' dilemma: mainstream scholars explain the lack of primary source evidence and perhaps the seeming lack of early Christian knowledge about Jesus by positing an insignificant Historical Jesus; but it seems quite miraculous that this nobody would come to be the most revered person on the planet!

Now moving to the supposed deeds of Jesus, Carrier begins with Paul's passage about the Eucharist, or Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Is this not proof that Paul is aware of the Gospel accounts, and thus believes in an Earthly Jesus? No, Paul again says that he knows this because of his divine revelations, does not even describe this ritual as a dinner with Jesus' closest followers, shows no awareness of Jesus being betrayed by a disciple, uses the same word for 'betrayed' as for 'delivered', and speaks of Jesus' future 'coming' instead of a 'second coming'.[1363] And of course, this eating of Jesus' body and drinking of his blood echoes the blood magic rituals of ancient Pagan mystery religions, and the intent may be for it to replace the Jewish Passover ritual.[1364] At best, there is nothing supporting historicity here.

As for Paul's other, sparse, descriptions of things Jesus did,[1365] his death, resurrection, and anything else Paul talks about, is all compatible – and even expected – on minimal mythicism.[1366] 1 Corinthians 2:6-10 even has the 'rulers of this age' (archons) kill Jesus, because they didn't know God's plan; had they known they wouldn't have killed him. Agreeing

with Doherty, myself, and numerous historicists, Carrier says that this ambiguous term most likely refers to the sky-demons,[1367] as humans (the Jewish elite and the Romans) would certainly have killed Jesus if they knew the plan, to secure salvation and to ensure defeat of the demons, or because they simply didn't care.[1368] This passage also echoes the *Ascension of Isaiah*, where the demons didn't realise who they were killing, and thus inadvertently condemned themselves. Recalling that the Messiah was supposed to die, Carrier rightfully asserts that it makes no sense for God to hide his plan from those he wanted to save, though it makes perfect sense for him to hide it from Satan and his demonic buddies, by communicating to his chosen people "in code".[1369]

Paul also says that the archons 'are being abolished' which makes sense if they are demons, and less sense if they are Jewish or Roman authorities who could be saved by converting at any time, and who were still in power.[1370] In fact, the Romans would still be in power several centuries later, and would actually adopt Christianity as their state religion. Let us also remember that Paul praised government officials, saying that they are in power because of God, as did Peter.[1371] Noting that the early Christian Origen agreed with this 'demonic' interpretation, Carrier rightly dismisses possible objections such as that the demons controlled human authorities. After all, Paul says that the authorities are "God's servants"! They can't be Satan's.[1372] Carrier also recognises that the passage – without any manipulation – perfectly fits minimal mythicism, while it would need to be 'shoehorned' in with a battery of *ad hoc* excuses, for it to make sense on minimal historicity.[1373]

Some critics might refer to 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16, which says that 'the Jews' killed Jesus, but this is widely regarded by even mainstream scholars as an anti-Semitic interpolation. And as Carrier notes, Paul was no anti-Semite, having claimed that the Jews would not be destroyed but would be saved (Romans 11:25-28); he also identifies as a Jew, and does not damn them elsewhere.[1374] In Romans 11:1, Paul even makes it clear that God would not 'cast off his people'. Furthermore, the passage seems to be referencing events that post-date Paul's writings, and even his life, such as the destruction of the Jewish nation/temple in 70 CE. Not to reason

in a circle, but it also *appears* to contradict 1 Corinthians 2, which seemingly laid the blame at the celestial archons.

Carrier then covers several more passages that could support historicity but work just as well on minimal mythicism, such as Romans 5:12-21, Philemon 2:7, Romans 8:3, 2 Corinthians 8:9, Romans 15:8, and 2 Corinthians 5:16-17.[1375] The latter is particularly interesting, as some take it to mean that these Christians knew Jesus in the flesh. This would make no sense as these Christians included Paul and the Corinthians who wouldn't have known a Historical Jesus, and the context makes clear that Paul is talking about their own fleshly/worldly perspectives. Also noteworthy is Carrier's discussion of Galatians 3:1, where Paul apparently chastises the Galatians for forgetting that Jesus' crucifixion was foretold by Scripture, which would have been the perfect time to mention eyewitnesses to an earthly event; of course, he does not.

I must note that some translations will say something like 'Jesus Christ was portrayed as crucified', which seems to better support historicity, but a more accurate translation is 'Jesus Christ was foretold as crucified', which fits with the 'secret messages in scripture' theme. If there is any doubt here, consider that Galatia is in Turkey. Surely the author couldn't mean to say that the Galatians literally witnessed Jesus' earthly death on a cross in Jerusalem. There is a similar situation with Romans 3:25, where some translators opt for 'God publicly displayed the death of Jesus' rather than the superior 'God planned/proposed the death of Jesus'.

Carrier concludes his discussion on Jesus' sayings and deeds by noting that while Paul's silence over the Historical Jesus is possible, it is certainly not entirely expected.[1376] In other words, it is absurd to think that there is a 100% chance that Paul would *never* mention anything explicit about an Earthly Jesus, from whom the whole shebang derived. To hammer the point home, for it to be 100% expected that Paul would never explicitly mention his beloved Historical Jesus, is to say that we would be shocked and chagrined, mortified and stupefied, to find even one small/incidental factoid about the Historical Jesus in Paul's writings. Inconceivable!

Carrier also claims that this silence is absolutely expected (100%) on a theory that says he did not exist historically.[1377] In this he is also, obviously, correct. Carrier then goes on to reiterate that we would not necessarily expect more explicit references to the Celestial Jesus, as those are the sorts of writings that would not have been preserved by the later Christians. We can only wonder what the missing Pauline letters had said. Now there is simply no arguing with Carrier's claims about the how the two theories relate to the 'evidence' of Paul's silence concerning the Earthly Jesus. If any scholar wishes to, they ought to hand back their doctorate. Carrier is right. Even if we judged that everything else in Paul's letters is inconclusive, the fact that he never conspicuously mentions the Historical Jesus is surprising, and this must certainly count as even just a little win for those that propose a non-historical Jesus.

Carrier makes his way to the handful of passages that critics think pose a major problem to the view that Paul believed in the Celestial Jesus. As an aside, I am not so sure that the case for Jesus mythicism would fail if Paul did believe in the Gospel Jesus, or something similar, like an 'intermediary'. We still see an evolution of the story that could well have had its origins in a Celestial Jesus. And certainly, none of this is crucial for my Jesus agnosticism to be considered reasonable, especially since Paul's sources are unreliable. Now Carrier begins with Romans 1:3, which says that Jesus was 'made' – some translations say 'born' – from David's sperm, and was fleshly. Keep in mind that there are similar passages, but the verse Carrier focuses on is the most important, as the explanation works for these others too.[1378]

Firstly, this could be allegorical, just as how Galatians 3:26-4:29 has every Christian coming from Abraham's sperm, with that passage even including the same phrase, *kata sarka*, according to the flesh.[1379] Now before we speak of a certain mistranslation, I must add that Jesus being born, and as a fleshly being, is not at all incompatible with minimal mythicism. Nevertheless, an unlikely ally is again to be found in Bart Ehrman who acknowledges that the passage (as well as others like it) has been tampered with, by believers who wanted to make it clearer that Jesus

was ‘born’.[1380] Carrier also is adamant that Paul says ‘made’ and not ‘born’, yet, like me, is still comfortable with a literal interpretation.

He explains how this would work, literally, on minimal mythicism, on a literal reading of 2 Samuel 7.12-14a, where God seems to say that he will take David’s sperm and establish from it a Davidic throne for the Son of God to sit upon, which will last forever.[1381] David’s throne did not last forever, so perhaps this is yet another spiritual solution for a physical problem. Furthermore, certain Jews believed that demons did this, even to David, so that it is no problem at all to think that God could do this too, especially given his omnipotence. The only thing here that I disagree with Carrier about is how others would perceive this ‘rather different’ idea. Unlike him, I think many critics will baulk at this. To those, I respectfully point them to the Bible, and to the non-canonical scriptures. There are a multitude of ‘crazy’ things that Jews and Christians believe/d. For example, there’s the whole God unnecessarily dying for the sins that he is ultimately responsible for thing… But it gets weirder. Much weirder. [1382]

Moving on, with Carrier realising that this ‘cosmic sperm bank’ idea also solves the dilemma that the messiah was supposed to be Davidic, Carrier shifts attention to Galatians 4:4 which has Jesus being made from a woman (unnamed – apparently unimportant) and made under the law. [1383] This too is no problem since Paul makes clear that these “things are said allegorically” (that is not an inference, he says it). In the context (Galatians 3:29-4:7, 4:22-5:1), Jesus was born under the old law according to both theories, and it really is an odd thing to say in a literal sense as all men (except Adam?) were born of women. Even literally, this is compatible with minimal mythicism, particularly as “gods, angels, spirits and demons could also be women, and give birth”, and it is indisputable that some early Christians did in fact believe that Jesus was born to a celestial woman.[1384]

Carrier also explains that this cannot be a point to stress Jesus’ being a Jew, as that is determined by patrimony or circumcision, has been made clearer elsewhere, and the (unnamed) woman’s ethnicity is not even mentioned. I would add that while this cosmic sperm bank idea seems

admittedly fantastic, it is the only ‘reasonable’ literal interpretation, with the only reasonable alternative being that it is intended non-literally. After all, the Romans passage says ‘sperm of David’, not ‘descendant of David’. The latter interpretation is but one of many that are possible. So in the best case for historicists, this passage is not intended literally, and is authentic, but ambiguous. The same can effectively be said for the passage in Galatians.

Finding that these at-best-ambiguous passages do not make minimal mythicism any less likely, and noting that that the oblique mentions of Jesus’ parentage look suspicious if historicity were true, Carrier thinks that granting even odds would be fair, but will charitably accept that these passages are still more likely on minimal historicity, in his overall calculation.[1385] So Carrier actually allows these passages about parentage to count as evidence *for* historicity, and thus *against* mythicism. Also, as you would no doubt have noticed throughout the treatment of these ‘problematic passages’, Carrier tends not to rely on the ‘it is an interpolation’ excuse, though it is frequently valid, as even our good friend Ehrman had indicated.

And so we come to the very last hurdle in accepting that Paul really did believe in a purely Celestial Jesus. Did our earliest Christian author really know Jesus’ biological brother, as allegedly indicated by Paul in Galatians 1:19, where he met with a certain, “James, the Lord’s brother”? If Jesus really existed, surely his brother would have known about it. Carrier begins by focussing on the somewhat similar 1 Corinthians 9:1-6, which has Paul defending the right of “other apostles and the brothers of the Lord” to be supported by the community when on church business; this passage seems to generally be talking about (possibly high-ranking) Christians, as is appropriate with fictive kinship.[1386] Carrier then asks that if Paul is not talking about Christians in general, and truly is focussing on the apostles and the Lord’s actual brothers, why would ‘other Christians’ not be included? Don’t they also deserve to be supported by the community?[1387] There are also several other verses of Paul referring to ‘brothers’, as well as ‘sisters’, in a non-literal way.[1388]

I would add that it seems exceedingly unlikely that Paul is literally talking about an Earthly Jesus' brothers, when they are never named or mentioned (except, *maybe*, James), and as it seems to assume that all of his brothers joined the ministry, which is itself never mentioned anywhere in the New Testament. The latter seems very implausible given that in the Gospels Jesus renounces his brothers, the authors appear unaware of their ever entering the church later, and Jesus is even given a saying explaining this, about prophets having no honour in their hometown and amongst their relatives.[1389] Furthermore, Paul refers to himself as some Christians' father – certainly this is not meant biologically.[1390]

Carrier also notes that Paul elsewhere states that all Christians are *equal* (so why stress the importance of Jesus' biological brothers?), and are all adopted sons and daughters of God (Galatians 3:26-29).[1391] Surely this makes us all sisters and brothers of Jesus, who was also adopted by God.[1392] Carrier further points to the possibilities that the term was reserved for more elite Christians (as somewhat supported by Clement of Alexandria, who asserted that only certain Christians were full heirs of God's kingdom), and that the term served as somewhat of a handy alternative to 'Christian' which was not yet widespread and which Paul shows no knowledge of.[1393] The latter possibility is particularly interesting as these early 'Lord-loving' Christians would certainly have needed a way to distinguish themselves from other Jewish groups, and it means that Paul is arguing *a fortiori*, like Carrier is.[1394] I.e. 'If everyday Christians can be supported, why not I?'

Carrier also notes the implausibility that Paul would be equating himself with Jesus' biological brothers (who would have obviously known him far better!), unless the Corinthians did not see them as special, in which case it makes no sense for Paul to be singling them out.[1395] With it seemingly obvious that the famous phrase does not have to refer to biological brothers, Carrier then finds numerous problems with the Galatians passage that has Paul name James "the brother of the Lord": this is again likely to be fictive kinship. Even the Gospels have James being John's brother instead of Jesus', and Paul never makes a biological relationship clear, which is decisive if all we had were Paul's letters,

because Paul would need to distinguish between fictive and actual brothers of Jesus. Unless there were no actual brothers.[1396]

Therefore, without even really mentioning the possibility (probability?) of interpolation as I did earlier, Carrier finds that all this does not make minimal mythicism any less likely, and might even render minimal historicity less likely if we find it odd that no explicit mention is made of the Historical Jesus' relatives; nevertheless, Carrier shall pretend that this significantly favours historicity.[1397] So again, though he thinks Paul's failure to distinguish biological from fictive brothers of Jesus is evidence *against* historicity, he nevertheless still counts it as evidence *for* historicity, and thus *against* mythicism. Moving on:

> Overall, it's the mythicists who were right, and not Case [an early critic of mythicists]. They argued that (1) some passages in Paul's letters are exactly what we would expect on their theory but not as expected if Jesus actually existed; that (2) the scant few passages in the Epistles that might refer to a historical Jesus are not only vague or problematic but also no less expected on the mythicist hypothesis; and that (3) the absence of more, clearer and more detailed references to a historical Jesus is strange and unexpected on any sound understanding of history and human nature. The excuses made up to explain away these facts are (1) not intrinsically probable and (2) not confirmed in any evidence (they are literally just 'made up').[1398]

Carrier concludes that there is nothing in Paul's epistles that requires an Earthly, Historical Jesus, and asserts that the lack of a "smoking gun" for the Celestial Jesus is expected, given what we know of the "historicist sect [that] won out and was so avid at altering and fabricating documents as well as throwing out or destroying them"; indeed, "we are lucky even to have the evidence we do".[1399] This sounds reasonable, and I suppose – well aware that this 'surprise' could also say that there is something implausible about our preferred theory – that our 'luck' is explained by the fact that the extant early writings, which can so easily work on mythicism, are more ambiguous than some of the 'missing' writings. Hence, they could also be interpreted in a way that favours the Gospels' portrayal, whilst also aiding a somewhat ecumenical agenda, without which Christianity would not have become so powerful. In other words, these ambiguous passages potentially aid the ecumenical agenda of the growing Church, without *explicitly* contradicting the Church's preferred view of Jesus.

Despite thinking that the evidence from the Pauline and non-Pauline epistles is at least 16 times more likely on minimal mythicism, Carrier charitably decides that the consequent probabilities should here favor historicity instead, effectively claiming that the Historical Jesus is 3 times more likely.[1400] Some interesting calculations await.

Alternative

The conclusion to an otherwise excellent chapter feels anti-climactic. Throughout the book, Carrier had been ravaging the case for historicity, and here, in arguably the most important section of the book, Carrier argues that the writings of the earliest Christians support historicity. He obviously does this to make a point, and perhaps also to add some excitement and suspense to what would have been an obvious conclusion; though it is still disappointing. I dub this outrageous controversy, 'Epistlegate'. Nevertheless, Carrier's ultimate aim is akin to mine own. We both seek to privilege historicity, with me doing this to an even greater extent, so that if the overall calculation favours mythicism, the result should be fairly incontestable. While Carrier did end by charitably judging that the evidence of the Epistles favours historicity, he truly felt that it was actually the mythicist interpretation that is rendered more likely – 16 times more, in fact – by the evidence of the Epistles alone.

I consistently endeavour to be even more generous to historicists than Carrier, so will temporarily ignore his counter-intuitive conclusion, and build from his actual belief that the Epistles are 16 times more probably expected on mythicism, than on historicity. I shall then be extraordinarily generous in saying that the Epistles only make mythicism slightly more likely. So I nearly call even odds. Nearly. From all the evidence we have considered, where I called even odds, that is, 100% expected on either theory,[1401] I shall finally deviate. I declare that the evidence of the Epistles is 100% expected on mythicism, while it is 99% expected on historicity. Though the Epistles overwhelmingly support mythicism, I shall concede that they only slightly do so. And this is indeed *very* slightly.

Alternative[2]

Or I could just call even odds. Again.

TL;DR

The Epistles generally show a lack of awareness of the Historical Jesus, which is certainly at least a little unexpected, while they contain passages that seemingly make more sense on the Celestial Jesus theory. Apparently problematic passages for the latter view are easily explained as no less likely on, or even further supportive of, minimal mythicism. Despite this, Carrier charitably grants 3:1 consequent odds in favour of historicity, the first time he rules in favour of that theory. I am also very charitable, granting almost even odds (99%:100%, slightly favouring mythicism), but also see the value in granting actual even odds.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

By combining the prior probabilities with the consequent probabilities in a Bayesian calculation, Carrier will finally determine how likely it is that Jesus existed – and will do so with his 'official' figures, and shall repeat the calculation with figures that are much closer to what he actually thinks.[1402] After summarising the numerical results of each evidence category's analyses, Carrier calculates that the probability that the Historical Jesus existed is at best a very sad ***32%***.[1403] Despite the intrigue caused by the previous chapter's unexpected conclusion, this should not be a surprise. Consider that the figures from the chapters on the epistles and the prior probabilities roughly cancelled each other out. All other figures were neutral or supported mythicism; hence this (actually generous) result.

Interestingly, if Carrier started off with equal prior probabilities (he favoured mythicism with 2:1 odds), and left the evidence used for that on the side, then the probability of Jesus' historicity would still be quite underwhelming, at just under ***49%***. Carrier can be quite generous with such figures, seeing this as 'almost even odds'. In my view, however, 'almost even odds' means 'not even odds'. Jesus' ahistoricity would still have been favoured. But the story does not end here. Carrier redoes his calculation, using figures much closer to his personal estimates (which still could be too generous). There will be no Epistlegate-type mercy shown here. This results in the probability of the Historical Jesus having existed as roughly ***0.008%***.[1404] That is not a typo. All those zeroes belong there. All of them. You are more likely to be hit by lightning. In other words, Carrier is virtually certain that Jesus did not exist, and cements his status in mythicist folklore. The Celestial Jesus theory, based on current evidence, should be considered true.

Carrier then calculates some more, demonstrating that even some hypothetical new piece of evidence that supports historicity may not be enough to convince us that Jesus really existed.[1405] Carrier then goes on to imply that older scholars may be unmoved due to religious faith or

career pressures, suggest that younger scholars may be more receptive, invites critics to construct sound arguments against his case (in a similarly *a fortiori* fashion), stresses the importance of logic, asserts (commenting on the prior probability) that Jesus can certainly not be placed into the "category of ordinary men" and belongs in a reference class with the likes of Attis, demands that opposing suppositions be properly (i.e. probabilistically) argued for,[1406] and notes that even posterior probabilities that slightly favour historicity (such as 60%) would "still make Jesus' existence reasonably uncertain".[1407] We just can't shake the reasonableness of agnosticism.

Carrier then says that some of the implications of this result are that the earlier documents need to be re-examined from a completely different perspective, and the Gospels and later writings need to be seen as legends. [1408] In fact, what Carrier's analysis of the Gospels has shown is that even without the earlier Epistles that portray Jesus as a purely celestial being, we'd still have reason to think him an entirely fictional character. Following, is a delightful summary of what actually happened (with what he just effectively calculated to be a certainty of 68%-99.992%), which masterfully incorporates *all* elements of the established contextual background knowledge that was outlined earlier, which themselves reveal that there is nothing implausible about this Celestial Jesus theory:

> Before the 20s, the Jesus that Christians would later worship was known by some Jews as a celestial being, God's agent of creation (Elements 40-42). Sometime between the 20s and 40s a small fringe sect of Jews, probably at the time led by a man named (or subsequently renamed) Cephas, came to believe that this Jesus figure had undergone a salvific incarnation, death and resurrection in outer space, thus negating the cultic role of the Jerusalem temple, freeing them from it politically, spiritually and physically, which was a very convenient thing to conceive at the time (Elements 1-7, 10, 18, 23-29, 43). They also came to believe that through this act their salvation had been secured through the defeat of the demonic world order, so long as they shared in that sacrifice metaphysically through baptism and ritual communion, a concept already adopted by many similar cults of the time (Elements 11-12, 18, 31, 37).
>
> This sect, like many others of the same period (Element 2), had been looking for 'hidden' messages from God in the OT (Elements 8-9) in order to learn how and when God would solve their present woes (Elements 3-7, 23-29). And also like many Jews, this sect was under syncretistic influences from diverse Jewish sects and the most popular and culturally diffused aspects of Greco-Roman religion and philosophy (Elements 30-39). Its members were also highly prone to having (or claiming to have) 'visions' (what we now would call dreams or hallucinations), and with a combination of such visions and their

searching for creative reinterpretations of scripture that spoke to their present troubles they convinced themselves that this celestial self-sacrifice occurred and was part of God's plan and had now been 'revealed' from heaven to a select few (Elements 15-17). We cannot know now whether the idea was discovered in scripture first, inspiring visions to corroborate or elaborate it, or whether it was creatively arrived at in visions first, inspiring the apostles to then find corroboration and elaboration in scripture. It could have been both, each a catalyst for the other.

This cult began as a Torah-observant Jewish sect that abandoned their reliance on [the] Levitical temple cult, and was likely preaching the imminent end of the world, in accordance with the scriptures, signs and revelations of the celestial Jesus. In the 30s or 40s an active enemy of the cult, named Paul, had (or claimed to have) his own revelation from this Jesus and became an apostle spreading rather than attacking the faith. Over the next twenty years he converts many, preaches widely, and writes a body of letters. During this time the original sect driven by Cephas fragmented. There are many church schisms, and many alternative versions of the original gospel arise, including the version inaugurated by Paul, which abandoned Torah observance and more avidly sought the conversion of pagans, seeking to unify Jew and Gentile in a common community (Elements 19-21).

Between the 30s and 70s some Christian congregations gradually mythicize the story of their celestial Jesus Lord, just as other mystery cults had done for their gods, eventually representing him rhetorically and symbolically in overtly historical narratives, during which time much of the more esoteric truth of the matter is reserved in secret for upper levels of initiation (Elements 11-14, 44-48). Right in the middle of this process the Jewish War of 66–70 destroyed the original church in Jerusalem, leaving us with no evidence that any of the original apostles lived beyond it. Before that, persecutions from Jewish authorities and famines throughout the empire (and, if it really happened, the Neronian persecution of 64, which would have devastated the church in Rome) further exacerbated the effect, which was to leave a thirty-year dark age in the history of the church (from the 60s to the 90s), a whole generation in which we have no idea what happened or who was in charge (Element 22). In fact this ecclesial dark age probably spans fifty years (from the 60s to 110s), if *1 Clement* was written in the 60s and not the 90s (see Chapter 8, §5), as then we have no record of anything going on until either Ignatius or Papias, both of whom could have written well later than the 110s (Chapter 8, §§6 and 7).

It's during this dark age that the canonical Gospels most likely came to be written, by persons unknown (Chapter 7, §4), and at least one Christian sect started to believe the myths they contain were real, and thus began to believe (or for convenience claim) that Jesus was a real person, and then preached and embellished this view. Because having a historical founder represented in controlled documents was a significant advantage (Chapter 8, §12; and Chapter 1, §4), this 'historicizing' sect gradually gained political and social superiority, declared itself 'orthodox' while condemning all others as 'heretics' (Chapter 4, §3), and preserved only texts that agreed with its view, and forged and altered countless texts in support. As a result, almost all evidence of the original Christian sects and what they believed has been lost or doctored out of the record; even evidence of what happened during the latter half of the first century to transition from Paul's Christianity to second-century 'orthodoxy' is completely lost and now almost wholly inaccessible to us (Elements 21-22 and 44).[1409]

Most of this is indisputable fact, and the rest is not at all implausible. The only part of this theory that Carrier concedes could be "incredible" at first look is "the idea that a transition from a secret cosmic savior to a public historical one happened within two generations, and without a clear record of it occurring", but addresses this by appealing to the Church's "dark age", wherein "*nothing* got recorded".[1410] I would add that religious adherents often remain adherents even where the (naturalistic) invention of their faith tradition can be clearly demonstrated.[1411] It seems that some people truly are willing to believe 'a lie'. As for this "dark age", Carrier notes that it also presents problems for minimal historicity. How do historicists explain the existence of sects that believed in a cosmically born Jesus, a cosmically killed Jesus, and a Jesus who lived a century earlier?[1412] As I noted earlier, how could so many early Christ-loving Christians deny or 'forget' Jesus' Earthly existence? The existence of such sects surely must be more likely if Jesus did not exist at all.

As if he could anticipate my critique, which reveals the extent of his objective argumentation, Carrier then resolves to address one final possible (and desperate) objection, which relates to the inherent plausibility of minimal mythicism: that 'the Jews' would never have invented a dying messiah.[1413] Carrier easily deals with this ridiculous objection by noting that some Jews already did so (apart from the Christians… you could revisit the fifth Element),[1414] and to assume that Jews were "monolithic in their thinking" is illogical seeing as how "Judaism was remarkably diverse and innovative in exactly this period"; furthermore, if "Jews could conceive of a dying messiah becoming a celestial Lord", then this could work for a celestial man as well as for a historical man.[1415]

Carrier also correctly states that there is no evidence that suggests that "exalting a slain messiah" would be considered blasphemous, illegal, or inconceivable, and thinks that the 'stumbling block' to Jews and 'foolishness' to Gentiles in 1 Corinthians 1:23 was not that a human Christ was crucified (as that is not a problem for Jews or Greeks) but that it was a *celestial* being that was crucified (i.e. Jews and Greeks demanded evidence of this, as so many would when being told of secret Bible codes

and mystical revelations) – and of course, the very next verse has Paul saying that some found it not to be a stumbling block, which explains why some did go with the idea.[1416] This passage, so often used to decry minimal mythicism's implausibility, virtually proves that Paul believed in a Celestial Jesus! More support is offered in the form of a 'pagan parallel'. If the non-existing and euhemerised Attis was preached castrated, which was a stumbling block for many according to Augustine, a similar embarrassing stumbling block regarding Jesus should not lead us to assert his historicity.[1417]

Perhaps in a mocking tribute of many Biblical books, Carrier provides 'another ending' summarising his case, then, whilst reiterating that the evidence of the Pauline epistles comprehensively supports the Celestial Jesus theory, he notes that the same cannot be said for the Historical Jesus theory; we would expect Paul, at that stage of the development to describe a Jesus that was an exalted martyr, not necessarily "a celestial Lord and God's intermediary".[1418] This makes perfect sense. It is strange for the earliest extant Christian documents to present such a high Christology already, with the later Mark seemingly taking a step back. The solution is the Celestial Jesus theory, where the development/evolution goes the other way. Jesus was already a celestial 'Lord'. Historicists will undoubtedly overlook this, as they can't seem to imagine that the Gospels represent the later development, even though the Gospels are the *later* documents. They will unfortunately – and illogically – continue to assume that the Gospels and the timeline/s therein are basically veridical, and that Paul's letters, which on these assumptions are set in the future, represent the later developments.

With his case well and truly argued for, and defended against a myriad of both half-decent and utterly rubbish objections, we at last arrive at Carrier's final thoughts. Carrier asserts that we should all either be confident mythicists or historicists, or admit that the evidence is insufficient to decide either way, so that we are effectively what I describe as Historical Jesus agnostics.[1419] He also invites readers to enter the debate, possibly by employing superior methods or more accurate figures, whilst also, as I have, excluding Christian apologists, who "are not rational people" that could "live with the conclusion that Jesus didn't exist".[1420]

Carrier leaves no doubt as to his position about Jesus, finally saying, “He did not exist.”[1421] Having thoroughly – over more than 600 pages (plus an earlier book on his Bayesian method) – presented his case, Carrier challenges his objective and qualified scholarly critics: “the ball is now in your court”.[1422]

Unfortunately, apart from myself, nobody has provided a proper critique of Carrier’s case in the academic literature. I suspect that the mainstream historicists are mimicking the Roman Catholic Church’s favoured approach to dealing with harsh realities; namely remaining silent and just hoping that this will all go away. Between Carrier, myself, and our many supporters from the academic and popular realms, however, we’ll make sure it doesn’t.

Alternative

I granted even odds to all priors and consequents (i.e. 100%:100%) except to the evidence from the epistles, where I decided 99%:100% in favour of mythicism. One reason for all this is to make it obvious how crucial the Epistles are in arguing for the Celestial Jesus theory. Now without any mathematical calculations necessary, it is obvious that my alternative scenario makes mythicism slightly more likely – at **just over 50%** – than historicity. In other words, it is certainly reasonable to think that Jesus did not exist as a historical person on Earth. And that was being extremely kind at every stage, as the priors and every evidence group was either neutral or clearly favoured minimal mythicism.

Alternative^{2}

If historicists won’t come to the party even on this, that the Epistles are slightly more expected on a theory that says Jesus was not on Earth, we can grant even odds for them. This is ridiculous, of course, but little is won. All prior probabilities and consequent probabilities would then be 50%. The posterior probability of both hypotheses would then be a neat **50%**. In other words, we don’t know, and can’t decide which theory should

be favoured. There is a pretty good chance that Jesus did not exist. It is thus entirely reasonable to have doubts about the Historical Jesus' existence. We should all be Jesus agnostics. And that's okay.

TL;DR

The result is decisive. Even when being incredibly charitable, it is very reasonable to doubt Jesus' earthly, historical existence. When being objective (i.e. not so charitable) in handling the extant evidence, it is reasonably determined that the Historical Jesus almost certainly did not exist. The evidence is just too odd on the minimal historicity theory, while it is perfectly – in a relative sense – expected on the theory of minimal mythicism.

Devil's Advocate

I shall now put on my cavilling hat and explain where Carrier went wrong. There is just one problem: *he has done no wrong*. It is not easy to find the flaws in a well-made case by an apparently objective person that seemingly doesn't care which way the cookie crumbles. Nevertheless, I have identified the 'Achilles heel' or 'weak point' of his case, and I use that in a relative sense. By that, I mean that I have identified the area that Carrier *might* be in error, and that his critics should focus on, in hoping to defeat his well-made case for mythicism, especially when this 'issue' means that around 95% of his book is, like a third nipple, effectively superfluous.

And this has nothing to do with his use of Bayes' Theorem. Anyone disputing this would need to offer her or his own probabilistic method/case, or simply accept the agnosticism that I am so comfortable with. Those that think that history is an art can offer nothing of use. They would only ever raise possibilities, with the rest of us wondering which one we should prefer. They can accept the humbling agnosticism that postmodernism entails, or take a hike. For those that see history as a science, that it should and does make probabilistic judgements, it is

obvious that some form of mathematical and logical reasoning is necessary.

Now there is nothing to be gained by disputing Carrier's consequent probabilities. He was far kinder than he should have been. It is simply a fact that we will all have to accept, that the consequent probabilities overwhelmingly favour minimal mythicism. In other words, the theory does a much better job of predicting/explaining the sources we currently have. That is not to be disputed; to do so would be a waste of time and effort. It might seem suspicious that Carrier can be so adamant when we have sources – the Gospels – that explicitly talk about an Earthly Jesus, whilst much is made about the odd verse in the Epistles that supports a Celestial Jesus, as if his hypothesis were unfalsifiable, but this is what the hypothesis predicts.

Furthermore, minimal mythicism is not actually unfalsifiable. If the Epistles truly did discuss a Celestial Jesus, then even one genuine passage explicitly purporting an Earthly Jesus would do significant damage to the mythicist case. Recall, however, that the passages in the Epistles used to support Jesus' historicity tend to be ambiguous, or are interpolations. An earlier source unambiguously mentioning the Earthly Jesus would also significantly harm the mythicist theory, but apart from Ehrman's innumerable imaginary sources, none have yet been found. Don't blame the mythicists. Blame the evidential record.

The existence of the Gospels and later documents that assert Jesus' earthly existence is to be expected on minimal mythicism, *as he defined it*; likewise, the general lack of extant documents proclaiming the Celestial Jesus. On the other hand, the poor state of the scant evidence looks quite impotent on the historicity theory, while the odd hint of the belief in a Celestial Jesus is entirely unexpected. Basically, *all* the evidence stemming from the extant sources is compatible with minimal mythicism, or outright favours it. But that does not mean that minimal mythicism is correct, or probable, and here is why. Any theory can be refined to perfectly fit the evidence, as with gerrymandering, and that does not necessarily make the theory probable. (The very fact that this can occur speaks to the importance of sound Bayesian or otherwise probabilistic

analyses.) This ‘refining’ only affects/raises the consequent probability – the prior probability still needs to be factored in.

Before continuing, I must note that anyone that fails to see how the minimal mythicist theory perfectly – at least in a relative sense – fits the evidence ought to leave the discussion. It is obvious, and not even crucial to Carrier’s case, as I shall soon explain. In any case, I believe that many critics, those not clued-on enough to realise that Carrier’s consequent probabilities are fair (or could be with a little tweaking), will be suspicious as to how his preferred theory just perfectly fits all the groupings of evidence, despite the fact that the extant sources seem to overwhelmingly proclaim Jesus’ historicity and only offer up the odd hint that the Celestial Jesus was once upheld. It is as if the theory has been ‘gerrymandered’. But such ‘gerrymandering’ is technically no crime. Though it *seems* unfair, it is perfectly valid, so long as these perfect or relatively perfect consequents are not used, *alone*, to argue that the theory is more probable.

And Carrier does not. Like a good Bayesian, and unlike many scholars in the field, he also factors in the inherent plausibility of the theory, via the prior probabilities. Of course, the critic who simply dismisses the Bayesian approach, often because they don’t understand it, can be ignored. Either the critic should use this approach to prove that Carrier is wrong, or they should give sound reasons for replacing it with an even better method that allows us to *calculate* which is the more probable theory. Regarding inherent plausibility, note that Carrier only needed a handful of pages to argue for his preferred priors, so that the work of the critic should be relatively easy.

Before delving into that, a quick word on this philosophical gerrymandering. Apologists often do this, such as when coming up with excuses to explain why an all-good God would allow or even create evil. These excuses, such as that God has *xxx* or *yyy* reason for allowing evil, make their theory better fit the evidence. There’s really no problem with that. It is only a problem if they ignore the effects their tactic has on the prior probability of the theory. And people like me do not let them get away with that, as you will hopefully see in my upcoming thesis and

book/s on the matter. These excuses, at best, make no difference to the resulting posterior probability, as the increased consequent probability is offset by a decreased prior probability. At worst, the resulting posterior probability could even be decreased, if the excuse is so implausible that it entails an even smaller prior probability.

I repeat: by refining their theory via unjustified excuses, these apologists unwittingly decrease the prior probability of their theory, since the excuses have not been thoroughly argued as being very probable, but only possible, so that now less probability-space is taken up by their specific god. This is because a distinction between gods that need the excuse, and gods that do not, has now been made. This decreased prior probability then, means that the final or posterior probability is unchanged, or even decreased. This is why I can confidently say that this philosophical gerrymandering is valid, even though it would seem to go against all reason and logic, and would seem to scupper my own attempts in my greater research on the implausibility of God's existence.

It simply doesn't matter if people do this, so long as we know how sound probabilistic reasoning works. So whether or not Carrier has done this, and for the record I think not (at least in terms of deceitful intentions), is of no consequence. What matters is if the prior probabilities employed by Carrier are reasonable, in other words, if they correctly take into account mathematically any gerrymandering done. That's how his case can and will – if possible – be defeated: to look at the math, and find anything that was left out, or wrongly estimated, and prove it. Note also that since the likelihoods indisputably favour minimal mythicism, it is not actually enough for the critic to award equal priors. They must actually demonstrate that the prior probability of minimal mythicism is relatively low, so low that even its greater likelihoods cannot salvage the theory.

So, on to the heart of the matter. Is there a problem with how Carrier constructs his prior probability for the Celestial Jesus theory? It seems obvious that if the Celestial Jesus theory apparently works so well on the consequent side, that we would need to defeat it by arguing that the prior probability should be reduced because of gerrymandering – that is, by the addition of assumptions that have not been shown to be highly probable –

or perhaps for some other reason. But historicists face a massive problem here: there is nothing inherently implausible about minimal mythicism. Seemingly prepared for such an objection, Carrier did his homework.

His informative and comprehensive chapters on the background knowledge reveal that minimal mythicism is very plausible indeed, and that the belief in a celestial saviour should even be *expected* to arise at some time or another, particularly at *that* time for the Jews. When something is expected, that means it has a pretty good probability of occurring. None of the assumptions in his minimal mythicism theory, or used to estimate any of its probabilities, are improbable at all, but were demonstrated to be highly likely or even certain. That historicists are often ignorant of these crucial background elements is not our concern, but theirs, and now that this has come to light, they have no excuse. It is time they started thinking logically and objectively.

I think the only recourse for the historicist, then, is to argue – and they do – that it is virtually impossible that Jews would come up with the idea of a suffering messiah. But they have presented no reasonable arguments to that effect – typically relying on unjustified presuppositions – *and*, as clearly explained by Carrier and myself, there is ample evidence to suggest that Jews could and did just that. This is not just evidenced by the development of Christ on both theories, but also by the Jewish intertestamental literature. Furthermore, it seems an impossible job to prove that Jews could not imagine a suffering messiah when the religious beliefs of millions of Jews of the era are unaccounted for, and syncretism, particularly with Greek religious and philosophical concepts, was rife. And again, suffering or martyred righteous men was somewhat of a trope amongst certain Jews, with voluntary human sacrifice often recognised as potent. A related issue would be whether Jews could imagine a purely Celestial Jesus/Messiah/Son of Man/Logos, but that is also quite possible, and has even more precedent in the intertestamental literature, and also the Old Testament, to the extent that even Ehrman acknowledges it. Philo, in fact, outright says it.

That leaves only the question of how to divide the prior probability space overall between all historicity theories on the one hand, and all

mythicist theories on the other. This might seem relatively unhelpful, given that Carrier and I both demonstrated that even equal prior probabilities still favoured the mythicist view or at least left us in complete agnosticism. Nevertheless, it is important, and I must admit to having initially felt uneasy about how easily and casually mythicism was granted a prior probability twice as high as that for historicity. Basically, Carrier subtracted the prior for the historicity theory from 100%, and *voilà*, a nice fat prior probability for minimal mythicism is the result. But this is sound, and the focus should then turn to if there could be other plausible ahistoricity theories that are artificially inflating the probability of minimal mythicism (so that we should also be considering *other* mythicist theories) and if he properly constructed the prior for historicity (if something could nevertheless still raise it somehow, that wasn't already considered).

Other ahistoricity theories were considered by Carrier to be extremely implausible, and the historicists will no doubt agree! If the historicists wish to seek out other highly plausible ahistoricity theories, which seems rather counter-productive to their aims, they are quite welcome to do so. They might arrive at an alternative ahistoricity theory that blows both minimal historicity and Carrier's minimal mythicism out of the water. Though, this wouldn't exactly be helpful to historicists. Considering all this, it seems relatively uncontroversial that the Celestial Jesus theory would take up just about all of the probability space for ahistoricity.

But even if other ahistoricity theories were quite plausible, such as those involving Roman conspiracy theories, or that Jesus was on Earth only for a few days,[1423] instead of just considering the Celestial Jesus theory outlined in this book, we would be discussing ahistoricity in general. This does not affect the prior for minimal historicity at all. In a technical – and eventually polemical – sense, historicity could even be advantaged, since it might emerge as the most probable theory (as in, 'the best of a bad bunch'), without actually being probable (as in, having a probability of more than 50%).[1424] So it really is quite fair that we consider that minimal mythicism takes up all the ahistoricity probability space in spirit (pardon the pun), if not in actuality. That leaves only the prior probability for historicity to be disputed.

The evidence Carrier used in deriving the crucial prior probability was basically that the Gospels portray Jesus in a way that is typical of entirely fictional characters. That doesn't mean that Jesus didn't exist, but it does mean that a low prior is justified and we would thus require extra evidence (quantitatively or qualitatively) than normal to be convinced of his historical existence. There is nothing wrong with the reference class Carrier employs. That such figures are generally entirely fictional is an indisputable fact. It doesn't matter if critics don't like that fact; they must simply put on their 'big boy pants' and deal with it. There is no sound reason to ignore this information, which obviously is very relevant to the issue. And if we did let it go, we still end up with a theory that favours mythicism or at least agnosticism. Even if a prior for Carrier's preferred form of mythicism were granted that was equal to the prior for historicity (or even significantly smaller) the consequent probabilities ensure that mythicism is more probable overall, or at the very least, leaves agnosticism over the issue a very viable option. There is simply no overcoming this. Unless…

Scholars could discover new evidence in future that overwhelmingly makes historicity more probable. But that has not happened yet, and may not ever happen. In fact, I find it unlikely that any new evidence would support Jesus' historicity. The most recent discoveries have tended to undermine the claims made by the Gospel authors. The same could be said for the texts of the Old Testament. It is truly amazing, and heart-warming to this honest scholar, that contemporary Jewish archaeologists are effectively refuting the central claims of their own cultural traditions. At this point in time, with the sources we have, the result is clear: it is perfectly reasonable to doubt Jesus' historical existence, and even to think that is highly improbable.

Throwing Down

Nevertheless, as referee, I award secular historicists a free kick. I have identified the crucial aspect and potentially weak point of Carrier's wonderfully constructed case. That is, the possible overestimation of

minimal mythicism’s prior probability. The question is, do they have the courage, and ability, to strike at it with a Parisian arrow? Of course, given that generally the best these people can offer is an over-reliance on the obviously unreliable canonical Gospels and an expansive collection of sources that don’t actually exist, I wouldn’t bet on it.

CONCLUSIONS

And thus ends my case for Historical Jesus agnosticism. That claim may seem confusing. Doesn't this book present several scholars' cases for and against Jesus' historicity? Yes and no. I certainly highlight the work of four of the most recent and noteworthy scholars dealing with this issue. One of these scholars is myself. And yet, the critiques of the woeful attempts by historicists forms a crucial part of my three-fold case for agnosticism. Indeed, without going on the offensive, and actively finding reasons for why alterative hypotheses might be preferable, it is the failure of the historicists that should already justify an agnostic view. Another crucial part of my case is the direct analysis of the sources, which leaves us questioning why we should take anything therein seriously. Finally, Carrier's case for outright mythicism supports my case for agnosticism, since it further reveals, probabilistically, that there is good reason to prefer alternatives to the mainstream view.

The cases put forth by the historicists Ehrman and Casey were frankly terrible. The failure of the case for the Historical Jesus is really quite remarkable, given that we only need one trustworthy reference to him being unambiguous and authentic. Nevertheless, there were some positives. For one, both Ehrman and Casey effectively acknowledged that the debate over the Historical Jesus' existence comes down to the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, which should already alert us that we need to proceed with caution. One rightly downplayed extrabiblical sources, while the other didn't even bother to mention them. And both could acknowledge that the Epistles say virtually nothing about the Jesus we see in the Gospels. Of course, there was one particularly sore point, shared by both. The case for Jesus' historicity effectively came down to relying on sources that do not exist, and ignoring the many influential sources that do exist.

This was quite an ironic discovery. The respected, mainstream historicists appealed to imaginary sources, and yet the 'crazy' ahistoricists

appealed to sources that we do actually have access to. The historicists ironically know that Jesus existed, through sources that don't exist; sources whose existence is even more questionable (to say nothing of their reliability)! We have come full circle. Recall how we decided that quibbling over qualifications diverted attention away from the real arguments. How apposite that was. It doesn't take a supremely qualified person to realise that you can't conclude anything based on sources that don't exist. Even for the very simple reason that you can conclude *anything* from sources that don't exist. They don't eliminate our doubts. They initially delay them, but ultimately accentuate them. Recall also how we earlier decided that if we were going to accept the existence of objective historical truths, and that we could get anywhere near them, that we would argue for probability rather than certainty, and that we'd do that by using the available evidence; by making use of the available (i.e. existing) sources.

But look at what Casey did. Look at what Ehrman and the others do. These prominent historicists strangely and illogically appeal to the majority, appeal to authority, appeal to possibility, and, worst of all, appeal to innumerable sources that don't even exist, in order to prove something that is supposedly very obvious. If we argued like they do, we would be overlooked (well, more than we already are), and rightly so. Contrast that with the approaches of Carrier and myself. Who are the ones trying to posit a wealth of non-existing foundational sources, whilst disregarding the impact of numerous actually existing sources? And who are the ones simply asking others to apply probabilistic reasoning to the sources that we do actually have access to?

This all should make it easy to figure out which scholars have an agenda, and which scholars merely go where the evidence leads. I'll leave it to you to decide if you preferred the arguments of the people that used evidence, and logic, and had no real desire to deny the existence of a Historical Jesus (who honestly sounds like a pretty decent bloke), or if you preferred the wild and unsubstantiated claims about near-infinite non-existing sources, and just so happen to arrive at conclusions that placate their ultimately Christian benefactors. I strongly encourage historians

from outside the field to scrutinise the methods and conclusions of these Biblical specialists.

Now apart from critiquing the work of others, my own involvement in the discussion mainly revolved around highlighting the numerous problems with the methods used in Historical Jesus scholarship, and the sources employed. Apart from the multiply fallacious appeal to imaginary sources, even secular Historical Jesus scholars tend to privilege the Christian texts, and misuse the Criteria of Authenticity. I mentioned how problematic this is; even when the principles of the Criteria are sound, the way they are used is generally not. I also pointed out the numerous problems with all the (actually existing) sources. The extrabiblical sources are later, largely inauthentic, and likely derivative if genuine. The Gospels are fictitious and allegorical accounts that leave us little reason to trust anything in them. The Epistles seem to make it clear that many early Christians had no clue that Jesus only recently walked the Earth. This provided many reasons to doubt Jesus' historicity, and to even think that the earliest Christians believed in a purely Celestial Jesus.

Carrier took this to the next level, formalising it with a sound probabilistic analysis. There either was a Historical Jesus who became mythologised over time, or there was a Celestial Jesus (or rather, the belief in a Celestial Jesus), who became historicised over time, probably through allegories. The later Gospels, quite expected on both theories, almost proved useless, except for the fact that the way Jesus is portrayed is consistent with how purely mythical heroes are portrayed. With the Epistles and other early texts, Carrier calculated figures that supported mythicism, given that the lack of a Historical Jesus in such texts is unexpected if he existed, while the only occasional indications of a Celestial Jesus are expected, given that it were Christians more closely aligned with the views of today's Christians that preserved and edited the texts. Carrier's extensive background information also revealed that there is nothing absurd about the idea that Jews would invent for themselves a purely Celestial Jesus. In fact, it virtually became expected.

I found it particularly relevant that despite all the mud-slinging between historicists and mythicists, and the claims to certainty, Carrier has

been the only one so far that has presented a sound, probabilistic case, which is precisely what is needed in historical research. Talk of historical expertise, nuance, subjectivity, and postmodernism is pretentious and/or irreverent. Historicists are claiming that Jesus *definitely* existed, and that those that disagree are effectively insane. Hence, the onus is on them to argue that their position is certain, or at least probable. Those that avoid doing so can join me in wallowing in the mire of agnosticism. Unless the mainstream scholar upholds agnosticism, as I do, it is not enough to simply present a case for their hypothesis being *possibly true*. They must demonstrate why their hypothesis is *probably true*. And Carrier is the only one to have done so. If he is lauded for nothing else, let us scholars at least recognise that much.

Instead, Carrier is criticised. Not overwhelmingly, however. Scholars like Avalos and myself are appreciative of his efforts. Few historicist scholars seem to have properly engaged with his work here, leaving amateurs to discredit him. In every case I have seen how they have failed. They tend to completely misunderstand the point. For example, one critic thought it unfair that Carrier's description of minimal historicity is too minimal. That's precisely the point! The more minimal it is, the harder it is to argue against, since the probability space isn't unnecessarily divided amongst numerous theories. The poor criticisms offered indicate people that have already decided that mythicism must be wrong, simply because they find the conclusion distasteful, without knowing what the best arguments are, let alone how to argue against them.

Others complain about the use of numbers, which raises questions as to how else one can determine what is *probably* true. As I said earlier, without the transparency that proper probabilistic analyses provide, these self-defeating critics have no basis with which to call minimal mythicism improbable, or their own theories probable. If they wish to defeat us, they must do so at our own game. Unless they wish to argue in detail why probabilistic reasoning grounded in the available evidence is silly, whilst it is perfectly reasonable to appeal to imaginary sources that could actually confirm anybody's theories. We certainly wouldn't want any would-be historian making all sorts of unjustified claims, such as that a certain someone was raised from death by another certain someone. Without

arguing probabilistically, we couldn't say boo about it. Either anything goes, or we can actually determine which theories are more probably true. The latter requires a numerical approach, even if it is the somewhat simpler alternative that I offered.

With historicity being poorly argued for, and with no convincing argument against ahistoricity, mythicism and Historical Jesus agnosticism look very attractive indeed.

The Glory of Agnosticism

Despite the many reasons to think the Celestial Jesus theory to be plausible, and even likely, I prefer to call myself a Historical Jesus agnostic, or ahistoricist, rather than a mythicist proper. One reason has to do with how I defined the terms, right at the start of this book. When it comes to the existence of God, I am not a theist. I am an atheist. But I am not a 'strong atheist' who is certain that God does not exist, I am an agnostic atheist. Similarly, while I think the evidence favours the Celestial Jesus theory, just as I think the evidence favours naturalism and other alternatives over theism (which we shall discuss in my next book), I do not dogmatically assert it as fact. Hence, I am a Historical Jesus agnostic, or simply, an ahistoricist.

One reason for this is humility. I am not so sure that we can be sure of anything, except that we exist. As such, I am always cautious when it comes to 'the truth'. I think that the best we can do is determine what we should believe, based on the evidence that is currently available. Bayesian reasoning slots in perfectly here, as that is what the famous Theorem is all about. It doesn't necessarily tell us what is true, but it tells us where we should lean based on the evidence. So while I do think, through my own efforts, and Carrier's, that the evidence points towards Jesus' non-existence, I do not proclaim his non-existence as a certainty. I think this is especially important with regards to this issue, where the sources are so scant. We are essentially arguing over clues derived from scraps.

Ahistoricists already suspect that much of the early Christian corpus is no longer extant, due to disinterest, given that dominant factions of the faith would most likely preserve that which was most beneficial to them, and perhaps even outright suppression. Even historicists acknowledge that most of the evidence that once existed is lost. Indeed, as we have seen with Ehrman's law, they rely heavily on this notion, having no case without it. With the majority of the vast body of early Christian writings no longer accessible to us, I feel that we are but looking at a toenail clipping.

What does it matter if all of the extant evidence leans in one direction, when all of the extant evidence constitutes a mere 2% of the evidence that once existed? In other words, even if all the evidence pointed towards historicity, or pointed towards mythicism, or pointed towards Scholar A's specific theory, or scholar B's specific theory, etc., agnosticism is still a reasonable position. This is particularly true given what we know about how certain Christians preserved certain texts and demonised other Christian groups. So while I happily endorse Carrier's Bayesian analysis and agree with it, I also happily remain an agnostic, and hope you will see the merits of Historical Jesus agnosticism as well.

While intellectual honesty is always a good thing, pragmatism may be looked upon far less favourably. Nevertheless, I have very practical reasons for espousing agnosticism instead of outright mythicism. As it makes the 'weaker' or 'lesser' claim, it is more easily defensible, and digestible. Drawing a parallel to the possible ulterior motives of historicist scholars, it may be better for my career to label myself a 'mere' agnostic. [1425] This is immediately more 'nuanced' and 'scholarly', so it is more likely to be accepted en masse – by scholars, and perhaps by the populace. Regarding defensibility, appealing to Paul, other early Christian authors, and probabilities, becomes unnecessary. We only need to consider the deficiencies of the case *for* Jesus' historicity, which are obviously many.

Regarding digestibility, just think of how many people prefer the term 'agnostic' to 'atheist', especially amongst scholars. This obviously has to do with portraying themselves as balanced and contemplative, rather than dogmatic like a fundamentalist. It is far more acceptable to say, "there are some good reasons to doubt Jesus' existence" than it is to say, "Jesus

definitely didn't exist!" If this pragmatism is less than ideal, I can only say that we must pick our battles. It serves mythicists – and critics of Christianity – better to be more reserved regarding their leanings towards concepts like ahistoricity. It largely avoids the burden of proof. And uncertainty over Jesus' historical existence still carries with it tremendous polemical power.

For example, if Jesus' historical existence is uncertain, then it becomes pointless to argue for the Christ of Faith, and entire academic disciplines need scrutinising. It also becomes far easier to gradually sway people over to the dark side of scepticism, rather than putting them off with aggressive, confronting, and seemingly absurd ideas. Now there are plentiful good reasons to doubt that the scholarly construct known as the Historical Jesus existed. The 'bread and butter' is that the sources are bad, and the methods are worse. The 'sex and violence' is that there is an alternative theory that fits the evidence better, and which is inherently very plausible. Let's revisit that last point.

Mainstream Scholars Already Agree with Us

I briefly want to highlight a very significant trend in this book. That Jesus did not exist is a plausible idea, and so is the idea that Christianity began with a purely Celestial Jesus. It must be stressed that every crucial aspect of our cases against historicity, and for agnosticism and mythicism, is already accepted in mainstream scholarship. That is not to say that all – or even a majority – of scholars accept them, but that each of these aspects – let's call them 'dots' – is held to by a significant number of mainstream scholars, and even Christians. In other words, these sceptical theories may not be so 'fringe' after all. They are built on solid ground, not on foundations of sand. Mainstream biblical scholars have discovered these crucial dots for themselves, without any help from the 'crazy' mythicists. They just haven't connected the dots. Below is a *partial* list of these all-important dot points:

- Pre-Christian Judaisms were very diverse, and much is still unknown about them.
- Pre-Christian Jews believed in multiple realms, and heavenly counterparts.
- Pre-Christian Jews searched and reinterpreted the old scriptures for contemporary guidance and prophecy.
- Pre-Christian Jews believed in a divine and celestial Messiah/Christ.*
- Pre-Christian Jews believed in a suffering messiah.
- Pre-Christian and other Jews required and developed spiritual solutions to the physical problems caused by the inaccessibility/destruction of the Temple.
- Early Christians reinterpreted the old scriptures and perceived Jesus as a divine, suffering, problem-solving Messiah.
- The Epistles – especially Paul's – say little to nothing about a Historical/Earthly Jesus, and show little to no awareness of the Gospels.
- The Epistles – especially Paul's – describe a Celestial Jesus communicating from Heaven.*
- Paul depicts Jesus as being killed by celestial demons.
- Paul's writings are influenced by Pagan ideas, and by Philo (or sources Paul and Philo share in common).
- Paul's sources for Jesus are the old scriptures and revelations.
- Paul is himself an unreliable source.
- Paul's writings were later edited to make the existence of the Gospel Jesus more obvious.
- There are no authentic pre-Gospel references to Jesus having biological siblings.
- Early Christianity has much in common with the secretive mystery religions.
- The case for Jesus' historicity effectively rests upon the canonical Gospels.
- The Gospels post-date the Epistles, especially Paul's.
- The Gospels and later documents tend to 'flesh out' the story.
- The Gospels' Earthly Jesus has much in common with purely mythical figures.

- The Gospels are unreliable, filled with supernatural and mundane fictions.
- Current use of the Criteria of Authenticity is very flawed.
- The later Gospels build on Mark, the first Christian document to unambiguously situate Jesus on Earth, in recent history.
- Mark allegorises Paul's writings.*
- Mark allegorises – directly and indirectly – the Old Testament.
- Mark is significantly based on other Jewish writings.
- Mark is significantly based on Pagan writings.
- Mark and the other Gospel writers fabricated much of their Gospels.
- Positing hypothetical sources underlying the Gospels is illogical, unnecessary, and diverts attention from extant sources.
- The Christian extrabiblical sources are of little use.
- The non-Christian extrabiblical sources are of little use.
- In light of the state of the sources, it is possible that Jesus did not exist.[1426]

I repeat: none of these crucial points is absurd. Additionally, each and every one is accepted by significant numbers of mainstream scholars. In fact, many of these are even accepted by that historicist exemplar, Bart Ehrman, who acknowledges that pre-Christian Jews believed in a Celestial Messiah! Is it really unreasonable to think that these points could be combined, to tell us that the earliest Christians, who were likely apocalypticist Jews, believed in a purely Celestial Messiah called Jesus, and that later stories that portray him on Earth are mere allegories? Surely this concept is at least plausible, if not outright probable.

*Note that *just three of these points* (marked with asterisks, above) demonstrate that the Celestial Jesus theory is plausible, and alludes to an organic development from already-existing Jewish beliefs; in other words, a Historical Jesus simply is not necessary to explain the development of Christianity from certain streams of Judaism. That pre-Christian Jews already believed in a Celestial Messiah (1), that Paul and other Epistle writers, ignorant of the Gospel accounts, teach us with information gleaned from their divine communications with the Celestial Messiah (2),

and that the earliest Gospel, the first to unambiguously situate Jesus on Earth in recent history, is an allegorisation of Paul's writings (3), should reveal just how plausible – and probable – the Celestial Jesus theory is. Alternatively, we can focus on just two points to lead us into complete agnosticism concerning the Historical Jesus: that the Gospels are unreliable and devoid of verifiable historical information (effectively concluded by MacDonald, his supporters, and others), and that Paul only discusses the obviously non-historical Celestial Jesus (as recognised by Lüdemann and others).

Finally, I wonder if it is the realisation that much of what mythicists assert is actually established in the recognised scholarship, which has led the respected biblical scholar James Crossley to now declare that "questions concerning 'mythicism' are turning up closer to the mainstream of historical Jesus studies."[1427] It seems like the Academy is slowly starting to see the reasonableness of Historical Jesus agnosticism, and beyond. To that I add that unless some exceptional piece of evidence is soon discovered, there really isn't anything more to say.

One More Thing…

Imaginary sources. Really?

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: My Conversation/Washington Post Article

For your convenience (the following appendix deals with rebuttals to rebuttals), here is my highly *summarised* case for Historical Jesus agnosticism, as printed in the Washington Post.[1428] This is a brief summary, and some aspects of it were altered by the editors.

Did historical Jesus really exist? The evidence just doesn't add up.

Did a man called Jesus of Nazareth walk the earth? Discussions over whether the figure known as the "Historical Jesus" actually existed primarily reflect disagreements among atheists. Believers, who uphold the implausible and more easily-dismissed "Christ of Faith" (the divine Jesus who walked on water), ought not to get involved.

Numerous secular scholars have presented their own versions of the so-called "Historical Jesus" – and most of them are, as biblical scholar J.D. Crossan puts it, "an academic embarrassment." From Crossan's view of Jesus as the wise sage, to *xxx*'s Jesus the revolutionary,[1429] and Bart Ehrman's apocalyptic prophet, about the only thing New Testament scholars seem to agree on is Jesus' historical existence. But can even that be questioned?

The first problem we encounter when trying to discover more about the Historical Jesus is the lack of early sources. The earliest sources only reference the clearly fictional Christ of Faith. These early sources, compiled decades after the alleged events, all stem from Christian authors eager to promote Christianity – which gives us reason to question them. The authors of the Gospels fail to name themselves, describe their qualifications, or show any criticism with their foundational sources – which they also fail to identify. Filled with mythical and non-historical

information, and heavily edited over time, the Gospels certainly should not convince critics to trust even the more mundane claims made therein.

The methods traditionally used to tease out rare nuggets of truth from the Gospels are dubious. The criterion of embarrassment says that if a section would be embarrassing for the author, it is more likely authentic. Unfortunately, given the diverse nature of Christianity and Judaism back then (things have not changed all that much), and the anonymity of the authors, it is impossible to determine what truly would be embarrassing or counter-intuitive, let alone if that might not serve some evangelistic purpose.

The criterion of Aramaic context is similarly unhelpful. Jesus and his closest followers were surely not the only Aramaic-speakers in first-century Judea. The criterion of multiple independent attestation can also hardly be used properly here, given that the sources clearly are not independent.

Paul's Epistles, written earlier than the Gospels, give us no reason to dogmatically declare Jesus must have existed. Avoiding Jesus' earthly events and teachings, even when the latter could have bolstered his own claims, Paul only describes his "Heavenly Jesus." Even when discussing what appear to be the resurrection and the last supper, his only stated sources are his direct revelations from the Lord, and his indirect revelations from the Old Testament. In fact, Paul actually rules out human sources (see Galatians 1:11-12).

Also important are the sources we don't have. There are no existing eyewitness or contemporary accounts of Jesus. All we have are later descriptions of Jesus' life events by non-eyewitnesses, most of whom are obviously biased. Little can be gleaned from the few non-Biblical and non-Christian sources, with only Roman scholar Josephus and historian Tacitus having any reasonable claim to be writing about Jesus within 100 years of his life. And even those sparse accounts are shrouded in controversy, with disagreements over what parts have obviously been changed by Christian scribes (the manuscripts were preserved by Christians), the fact that both these authors were born after Jesus died (they would thus have probably

received this information from Christians), and the oddity that centuries go by before Christian apologists start referencing them.

Agnosticism over the matter is already seemingly appropriate, and support for this position comes from independent historian Richard Carrier's recent defense of another theory – namely, that the belief in Jesus started as the belief in a purely celestial being (who was killed by demons in an upper realm), who became historicized over time. To summarize Carrier's 800-page tome, this theory and the traditional theory – that Jesus was a historical figure who became mythicized over time – both align well with the Gospels, which are later mixtures of obvious myth and what at least sounds historical.

The Pauline Epistles, however, overwhelmingly support the "celestial Jesus" theory, particularly with the passage indicating that demons killed Jesus, and would not have done so if they knew who he was (see: 1 Corinthians 2:6-10). Humans – the murderers according to the Gospels – of course would still have killed Jesus, knowing full well that his death results in their salvation, and the defeat of the evil spirits.

So what do the mainstream (and non-Christian) scholars say about all this? Surprisingly very little – of substance anyway. Only Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey have thoroughly attempted to prove Jesus' historical existence in recent times. Their most decisive point? The Gospels can generally be trusted – after we ignore the many, many bits that are untrustworthy – because of the hypothetical (i.e. non-existent) sources behind them. Who produced these hypothetical sources? When? What did they say? Were they reliable? Were they intended to be accurate historical portrayals, enlightening allegories, or entertaining fictions?

Ehrman and Casey can't tell you – and neither can any New Testament scholar. Given the poor state of the existing sources, and the atrocious methods used by mainstream Biblical historians, the matter will likely never be resolved. In sum, there are clearly good reasons to doubt Jesus' historical existence – if not to think it outright improbable.

Appendix 2: Replies to Dickson, Bird, and McGrath

In the first few sections of this book, I examined the arguments by the very people I target. The arguments by these atheistic believers in the Historical Jesus were found to be extremely poor, particularly the constant reliance on imaginary sources. In this appendix we shall take a little look at some Christian reactions to my work. They people clearly didn't get the memo; that this is a debate among atheists. Some of their responses seem to justify my position on that. (I think they partially do this so that they can be on the 'winning side' for once.) I look at Dickson's and Bird's more in-depth critiques of my Conversation/Washington Post article,[1430] and also McGrath's… well, I don't really know what McGrath does, actually. He seems to love being involved, even though he has done nothing substantial to advance the discussion.

There are a few others who are particularly scathing, but they are honestly not even worth mentioning. I am generally only open to discussing this issue with Christians who don't need to resort to the plausibility of miraculous claims and the inerrancy of the Bible.

John Dickson

And so we start with John Dickson, from Macquarie University's Ancient History department. A man I have had some respect for, due to his *generally* avoiding conservative Christian claims in his capacity as a university lecturer. Although, this is the same man who claimed that "there is a resurrection-shaped dent in the historical record."[1431] Unfortunately, he did not take too kindly to my article, and published a response on the ABC website.[1432] What follows is basically a line-by-line takedown. He begins by claiming how he initially "baulked at writing a reply", indicating how silly such scepticism is.

Of course, as we have seen, it is silly not to be so sceptical. His first major error, however, is – in an obvious attempt to poison the well – in declaring that "he is on his way to completing his PhD at Sydney University – notably in religious philosophy, not in history". I actually work in the broader field of Studies in Religion, and my PhD topic exemplifies this by investigating theistic claims while utilising the methods of philosophers of religion, historians, and sociologists. But even the philosophy angle should serve as a warning that he ought to tread carefully.[1433] It is odd that he somewhat recognises my status as a 'philosopher' yet constantly attacks the logic of my approach.

Offering some disingenuous platitudes regarding my research capabilities, he asserts that he is my "former lecturer" and would have failed me for this piece. In actuality, I, encouraged by one of my supervisors, sat in on several of his lectures on the Historical Jesus. I loathed every minute of it, especially when his even more conservative colleagues took over, and spent more time with my palm firmly placed on my head. Moving on to more substantial critiques, Dickson actually acknowledges that the Celestial Jesus theory could echo what occurred with Romulus, but finds it too implausible that this could occur over "10-20 years". He does not attempt to justify this statement. It doesn't even make sense to a scholar like myself, who does not uncritically accept the claims (such as regarding timelines) that the Gospels make.

After typically claiming that mythicists are "the historical equivalent of the anti-vaccination crowd" (note that I'm technically agnostic on the issue, but nobody seems to care about such crucial details), Dickson accuses 'mythicists' of crying "Conspiracy!" I have not done so, and neither have other well credentialled Jesus sceptics. I merely point to the idiosyncratic and terrible methods used by historicist (and also Christian) scholars. Dickson then gets to my framing this issue as a debate among atheists:

> Secondly, no student – let alone an aspiring scholar – could get away with suggesting that Christians "ought not to get involved" in the study of the historical Jesus. This is intellectual bigotry and has no place in academia, or journalism. I would likewise fail any *Christian* student who suggested that atheists should not research Jesus because they have an agenda. Nobody in the vast field of historical Jesus scholarship operates with such an *us-and-them* mentality. This is why the methods of history are so important. They are how

> we assess each other's work. We don't fret about other scholars' private beliefs and doubts. We judge their handling of the acknowledged evidence according to the rules of historical inquiry. Anything else would be zealotry.

Apart from portraying me as a 'mere student' rather than a scholar, [1434] Dickson accuses me of intellectual bigotry, ignoring (or rather, not bothering to investigate, by simply asking me) the many practical reasons I have for excluding Christians from the debate. That Christians would struggle to be objective over the issue of Jesus' historicity is an obvious concern, but features last on my list of reasons for excluding them. His accusation is further unwarranted, as my little essay didn't explain all my reasons – or even mention one. He just assumed that I am bigoted. He then takes issue with my claiming that Paul's epistles support the Celestial Jesus theory, but offers no argument or analysis as to why I am wrong, simply referring to the handful of passages that could indicate historicity (but which could also indicate ahistoricity). Dickson goes on to embarrass himself, justifying my position that Christians should be excluded from the debate:

> Fourthly, there are numerous idiosyncratic statements throughout Lataster's article which he passes off as accepted insights of historical study. For example, the claim that the Gospels are all "anonymous" is no more accurate than insisting that a modern biography is anonymous on the grounds that the biographer's name appears only on the front and back cover of the book not in the body of the work.

The notion that the Gospels are anonymous is obvious to anyone reading the texts, and, due to many other reasons, is widespread in Biblical scholarship. We simply don't know who wrote them, their qualifications, their intentions aside from promoting the Christian faith, etc. It is no wonder that he gleefully attacks my character and qualifications; he has no arguments of substance.[1435] He embarrasses himself even further, making outrageous claims like "a little chronological distance from a subject - 80 years in the case of Tacitus, 20-60 years in the case of the New Testament - can actually enhance historical portraits", as if we should be thankful that we lack primary sources! Furthermore, while trying to argue that I am on the fringes of scholarship, which is irrelevant, his belief regarding the Gospels' authorship actually places *him* on the fringe. Dickson continues:

> Equally eccentric is the claim that Paul in Galatians 1:12 "rules out human sources" for his knowledge of Jesus, thereby indicating that his Jesus is a celestial being not an historical one. Leaving aside the obvious *non sequitur* (why on earth should a divine revelation, such as Paul claims for himself in Galatians, not concern an *historical* person?), Raphael's idea is shipwrecked on the rock of 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, the earliest datable statement of Christian belief, in which Paul unmistakably *rules in* his dependence upon human sources for his knowledge of an obviously historical Jesus. This is such an obvious and widely commented upon issue that I am at a loss to explain Lataster's claim.

Firstly, Paul *does* rule out human sources, and only ever mentions his ultimately divine source. That Dickson is unaware of this, or simply doesn't like it, is not my concern. He ought to do his homework and simply accept the facts – which is often hard for believers to do. Secondly, I do not move on from that to conclude, 'therefore Jesus did not exist'; I just mention it as important to our investigation, and move on. I am well aware of how to formulate a logical argument, unlike Dickson. Thirdly, 1 Corinthians 15:1-5 talks about what Paul received (which elsewhere is always from his divine source), and then he mentions things about Jesus that he knows from "the Scriptures" – not once does Paul mention a human source, which he elsewhere rules out. So Dickson is just lying. He also mocks me for apparently claiming that there is overwhelming scholarly support for a purely Celestial Jesus in Paul's writings. I made it clear that the overwhelming support comes from the writings themselves, not from the scholars analysing them, which should be multiply obvious to all.

Dickson then takes issue with my highlighting the lack of primary source evidence, invoking his oft-used tactic of downplaying/ignoring the primary source evidence for other historical figures. This is, of course, disingenuous, and also does not solve the problem. *If* I must take an agnostic position on other important figures of history as well, then I shall call the apologists' bluff and do so (also revealing that I am not preferencing any tradition, unlike many religious believers) – but this is all academic as we do have contemporary evidence for numerous historical figures, unlike for Jesus. His continuing efforts to downplay contemporary and early sources is shocking, and reveals that Dickson is not the competent and honest historian he thinks he is. Moving on:

> In any case, to suggest that the Gospels are somehow dodgy because they are not contemporaneous accounts of Jesus indicates a basic unfamiliarity with the discipline of

history.

Again, he misinterprets me. The Gospels are not “somehow dodgy”. They are very dodgy! And for a multitude of reasons. Them being filled with obvious fictions is one, for example. He ends with a few more insults, such as insisting that I earned a “Fail”. What is especially disturbing is that he really did not deal with the numerous issues I raised in this small essay, and in my overall work on this topic. Most revealing is that he did not even mention, let alone try to resolve, my serious concerns about the reliance on imaginary sources. That is rather unfortunate, given that it is the main tactic used by Jesus historicists, and the one that I oppose the most.

I must say that this reply by Dickson, and our associated private and semi-private stoushes, has greatly diminished my opinion of the man. [1436] I no longer see him as an honest and competent historian. That’s quite unfortunate, especially when he questions my credentials, as my most relevant degrees (I have several, in diverse fields) are supposedly not in History but in the Philosophy of Religion. That’s simply not true, with my more relevant MA and PhD being in Studies in Religion, which incorporates Philosophy of Religion, History of Religion, and Sociology of Religion. And it is as if he thinks that a scholar’s initial qualification precludes them from later specialising in other areas. Decades of a career limited by their very first project, undertaken when still a student! I wonder if he thinks most Jesus researchers, believers and non-believers alike, are also not proper historians as well, given that their degrees technically tend to be in Theology, Divinity, and New Testament.

Back to his ABC article, it is gratifying and gives reason for hope that many people came to my ‘defence’ and noted the many, many errors Dickson commits. Particularly noteworthy is this, from the comments section, by someone claiming to be a university lecturer (Suzanne):

> I am a university lecturer myself, and cannot imagine publishing a piece of writing that contains such lofty disdain for a (former) student. Smug professorial contempt oozes from this piece. Clearly Raphael Lataster came to reject your bias in favour of Christian doctrine and sought his own path. Good for him. Reflections on whether or not Jesus existed in history are perfectly legitimate and many a respectable historian has approached this topic. There is a knowledge gap wide enough to drive a truckload of scepticism

> through, and perhaps it is time that more people investigated that knowledge gap instead of just accepting the received "wisdom" of their lecturers… Professor Dickson is using the fact that Raphael Lataster was his student to mock him. That is completely unacceptable and should potentially be the basis for an official rebuke from his university. Shame on him.

Dickson's reply was so ill tempered and erroneous, that even theologians took him to task:

> [Dickson's] teaching legacy is entangled a bit with this former student's prominent publication in the Washington Post… Dickson would do well to take his own advice: "There is just an urgent need for all of us to be more cautious before making (or accepting) grandiose claims." He thinks Lataster's concluding statement is grandiose, which it is not. Would that he might have actually spent words on answering more of Lataster's claims instead of engaging in histrionics (there were several other openings for Dickson, if he wanted to seriously address the arguments). It is arguably evident to a third-party reader that Dickson is playing a "scorched student" strategy to distance himself from any criticism about where Lataster might have done his learning. Rather than preserving his credibility as an instructor, his emotional and careless response shines a light on his own exposure to bad marks and frankly, succeeds in making Lataster look better for having come through his influence with a better than average willingness to keep questioning the "settled" scholarship. Fail.[1437]

Actually, he generally seems tempestuous, perhaps because of the tension he suffers as a qualified historian who must somewhat argue that his religious beliefs – and that of his followers – are historically implausible. Earlier, Dickson also 'failed' another scholar, Reza Aslan – who is not a mythicist – who supposed that Jesus was a revolutionary. In the comments section, Dickson seemed regretful:

> Having just read this through again (knowing Reza Aslan is in town at the moment), I regret the pompous and supercilious tone throughout the piece. I'm likely right in most of the historical observations I make above, but that's no excuse for being a jerk. Apologies, folks![1438]

I would also like to state on the record that John Dickson has consistently rebuffed my offers to publicly debate with me on Jesus' resurrection, despite the facts that he is *heavily* involved in public apologetics, and that an apologist colleague of his has accepted my challenge.[1439] Perhaps he is fearful, as many observers to our public discussions have implied, that 'the student has overtaken the master'. I

would like to leave it at that, but just have to note one last issue (emphasis mine):

> … it is clear that authors such as Tacitus, like the Gospel writers, *employed earlier sources* within their works.
>
> … 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, the earliest datable statement of Christian belief, in which Paul unmistakably rules in his dependence upon *human sources* for his knowledge of an obviously historical Jesus.

Imaginary sources. Again. Just like our secular historicist friends, Dickson espouses Ehrman's law.[1440]

Michael Bird

The equally uninvited theologian Michael Bird enters the fray, calling me a "fruit loop", for which commenters on his own blog criticised him. [1441] They are right to do so, as this man is supposed to be a scholar, and a Christian; and I only wish to share my research findings. A good start then… Bird's critique[1442] is more substantial than Dickson's, but still poor, and partly indicative of why Christians should stay out of it. Typically ignoring my status as an agnostic on this issue, Bird rudely asserts that mythicists "are the equivalent of climate change deniers or 9/11 conspiracy theorists", and points to a lack of "peer-reviewed publications". Given my articles, and Carrier's book, all peer-reviewed, the slothful and ignorant Bird is clearly not going to have a good day. He continues, giving mythicists some ammunition:

> I serve on the editorial board for the Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus, where we have an editorial team of people from all faiths and none, celebrated experts in their fields; and I can tell you that the Jesus mythicist nonsense would never get a foot in the door of a peer-reviewed journal committed to the academic study of the historical Jesus.

Is this really the way to deal with people that apparently are conspiracy theorists? To *confirm* their suspicions – seeded by the sacking of Bauer – that they are being mistreated, and that they will not be heard? To acknowledge the hegemonic nature of the field? To concede that favourable conclusions take more precedence than sound arguments and

methods? Incredibly, this is also an admission of sorts that it is indeed crucial that those investigating the question are *external* to this parochial and increasingly irrelevant field, as I have shown with my little successes (as I am a Religious Studies scholar, rather than a specialist on the New Testament), in publishing on this topic in peer-reviewed journals (of Religious Studies and the Humanities in general).[1443] Like Dickson, Bird goes for the scorched earth approach in downplaying the evidence for other historical figures, and also points to the vague support for a Historical Jesus in Paul's writings, oblivious to their ambiguity, Paul's stated sources, and all the while proceeding from his Gospel-influenced presuppositions. He bizarrely adds:

> Lataster seems to regard Paul as historically spurious because he did not write a biography of Jesus. An odd reason to dismiss him as an authentic source.

I said nothing of the sort. What is spurious is that Paul, and his audience, seem to care not one iota for the Earthly Jesus' teachings and deeds. And I dismiss Paul as an "authentic source" because of his outrageous claims, among other good reasons. Incredibly, it is as if Bird knew that this very book was in production:

> Fourth, what I find absolutely flabbergasting is that Mr. Lataster rejects the account of Jesus by secular and non-religious historians like the late Maurice Casey and Bart Ehrman in favour of the conspiracy theories of amateur atheist historian Richard Carrier… Casey and Ehrman have both written animated attacks on the Jesus mythicist theory and pretty much laid waste to it… these two can hardly be accused of toeing a religious line… On the one hand, then, Mr. Lataster nonchalantly mischaracterises and dismisses Casey and Ehrman, without engaging their actual arguments against the mythicists. On the other, he eulogises Carrier's crazy thesis without batting an eyelid. This is a telling failure to discern good scholarship.

Given my in-depth critique of the work of these three authors in this book, I surely don't need to say anything, apart from calling attention to the dubiousness of calling Carrier an "amateur atheist historian". I will add, however, that calling Carrier's work "crazy" is a bit rich, for somebody who has not themselves done a thorough comparative analysis on the two most plausible hypotheses concerning Christian origins. Until he does his own analysis, or thoroughly critique's Carrier's, Bird ought to keep his typing hands firmly in his pockets. He ends by implying that I am "writing an apologetic tract for [my] tribe", blissfully unaware that I am

primarily attacking atheistic scholars, and have no more than a passing interest in what Christians have to say on the issue. Again, this person clearly didn't get the memo.

James McGrath

As I mentioned above, I'm not entirely sure what it is that New Testament specialist James McGrath actually does, and why he is 'involved' in the discussion. Despite earlier claiming that he would engage with my work, all he ever seems to produce is snarky little blog posts. The most substantial thing I've seen him offer here is a disturbingly sycophantic review of Casey's awful book on the subject.[1444] The lowlights of this little review include McGrath merely repeating Casey's claim about Luke being an "outstanding historian" (which as you recall, was merely claimed, and claimed again, without even a hint of argument), and his defending Casey's grossly unprofessional and bigoted behaviour (recall his comments about a homosexual critic).

He even agrees with Casey's criticising of an author who relied on 'spiritual sources' which, while obviously reasonable, is ironic given that both Casey and McGrath place a lot of faith in Christian authors who did the same.[1445] McGrath also, not so critical when it comes to unreliable Gospel authors, seems quite happy to rely on what is effectively Christian hearsay:

> Testimony about what someone claims to have heard from an eyewitness would not stand up in a court of law today - it is what is known as "hearsay". Nevertheless, sometimes hearsay is all a historian has, and the rules of historical investigation are not as strict as those of the American legal system. We can utilize any sources available, and the only consequence will be that our conclusions about what happened will be less certain than if we had first-hand accounts written by the eyewitnesses themselves.[1446]

He seems quite interested in my work, without feeling the need to properly engage with it. For example, he re-posted Bird's critique of my Washington Post piece on his blog, which turned out to be a little humorous, as all the commenters (who weren't McGrath) were actually supportive of me and/or critical of Bird – on his own website.[1447] In

one post, he objects to my assertion that 1 Corinthians 2:6-10 implies that the sky-demons killed Jesus, offering this very comprehensive and sophisticated reply: “What?!” That’s it. It is almost laughable that he is unaware that numerous scholars, including historicists and even Christians, see the archons as being sky-demons; until I remember that this fellow actually is responsible for teaching young people. People who pay for an education. That’s downright depressing. In the same post, McGrath bizarrely criticises Carrier for getting his book peer-reviewed! Sometimes I really wonder how these people get in to the academic system, and are deemed fit to teach future generations.

In various blog posts, McGrath also notes that my earlier book, *There Was No Jesus*, *There Is No God*, and mythicist books in general, are self-published. Given that the book of his that I just referenced is also self-published, it is unclear how I am to take this. I am also unsure if he meant to imply that such literature is always self-published (as this book also is), but, again, between Carrier, myself, and several others, there are now several peer-reviewed books and journal articles advancing the agnostic/mythicist view. One by one, the go-to complaints against Jesus ahistoricists seems to be withering away. As for my earlier book and its associated academic thesis, McGrath never seemed to make good on his promise that he should critically engage with it.

Interestingly, though he seems desperate to involve himself in a conversation he was never invited to, McGrath has never actually published anything substantial – a book, a journal article, a decent-sized internet critique – on this topic. This led to a humorous virtual altercation where McGrath was criticising me on a semi-public discussion on social media, until I finally stated that my agnosticism is partly due to the fact that those few that have (at least somewhat) thoroughly argued for Jesus’ historicity rely on imaginary sources, of which he seemed ignorant about. I further said that I have not critiqued his own case, because he hasn’t made one; indicating that he should leave the discussion until he does offer something substantial. Having seemingly accepted this, he promptly ceased the discourse.[1448]

Until he makes his own case, or comprehensively defends someone else's, McGrath is one of a long list of people who seem to just want to get their names out there despite have nothing useful to offer to the discussion.

Turning Tides

I think that is enough to show that these believers have very little to add to the debate. And these were 'the best' – with other, more conservative, critics pontificating about how we nasty atheists shouldn't discriminate against supernatural claims. This all but justifies my keeping the discussion among atheists, though I have many more reasons for doing so. Frankly, these Christians are not worth consulting on this issue. They believe that Jesus walked on water, for Christ's sake. I'll stick to the arguments put forth by atheistic historicists, like the Ehrmans and Caseys of the world. They make more than enough errors for me to deal with.

(It is also worth noting that mythicist ideas are becoming quite popular now, and are not actually restricted to atheists. A recent "Church of England survey found that four in 10 people did not believe Jesus was a real person". Astonishingly, only around 2 in 10 people surveyed were identified as atheists or agnostics! Christians made up the biggest group. Turning tides, indeed.)[1449]

Finally, I find much of this highly ironic. Carrier and I are recent examples of Jesus sceptics who finally put forth sober and scholarly arguments in the peer-reviewed academic literature, as well as in the popular realm, and we are opposed by the likes of McGrath and Hoffman who offer up polemical blog posts and snide Facebook rants in return. [1450] How times have changed!

AFTERWORD

By Richard Carrier

What the Academy Should Be Doing with This

With this book, *Jesus Did Not Exist: A Debate Among Atheists*, Raphael Lataster has certainly demonstrated at the very least one thing: the entire field of Biblical Studies should be taking this question seriously; yet they have not. This has to stop. They need to either build a more defensible case for historicity, one that does not violate logic or rely on non-existent evidence, or they need to officially recognize, at the very least, that historicity agnosticism is a credible response to what little evidence there is. The Academy needs to stop lying about the evidence or about the arguments of peer-reviewed experts who challenge historicity. They need to address those arguments *as actually made*, and the evidence *as actually presented*. And Lataster has shown that this isn't what the experts are doing. So what should they do?

First, method.

If there are better methods, they need to be presented and proved effective, without circular argument. If there are not, the Bayesian method must be accepted, and learned so as to be used (and critiqued) correctly and competently.

Historicity agnosticism must also be a viable outcome of any method proposed. If a method does not allow for uncertainty, when the evidence does indeed leave us uncertain, then that method is not logically valid. It should be abandoned. Bayesian method allows for degrees of uncertainty, and as Lataster shows, it can explain when that uncertainty is such as to warrant agnosticism.

Second, prior probability.

It must be acknowledged that unlike most average people in antiquity, Jesus belongs to several reference classes that more commonly contain mythical people than historical ones. Worshipped dying-and-rising savior gods. Conveniently exemplary counter-cultural heroes. Tragic god-kings. Suffering righteous holy men. Angels. Pre-existent creator beings.

It must be acknowledged that all of the *non-existent* dying-and-rising savior gods, conveniently exemplary counter-cultural heroes, tragic god-kings, and suffering righteous holy men, were all placed in Earth history somehow and somewhen, often with whole biographies. Not one was left without this development. Whether they actually existed was never relevant to this outcome.

It must be acknowledged that these two facts entail Jesus is more likely to be non-existent, like them. Not certainly to be. But more likely. Because that is true of all the others: most dying-and-rising savior gods placed in history with biographies are nevertheless mythical; most conveniently exemplary counter-cultural heroes placed in history with biographies are nevertheless mythical; most tragic god-kings placed in history with biographies are nevertheless mythical; most suffering righteous holy men placed in history with biographies are nevertheless mythical; most angels and pre-existent creator beings are mythical.

We cannot privilege Jesus. If *they* are most likely to be mythical, *he* is most likely to be mythical. *Until* we look at the evidence for Jesus. Maybe that evidence will establish that Jesus is among the exceptions. Or maybe it will leave us uncertain. Or maybe it will corroborate a common sequence of events: a mythic or revealed savior, later historicized. But before we look at that evidence to see, we have to admit, Jesus belongs to several classes of person who were usually not historical, but all of whom were portrayed as historical. Just like Jesus. This cannot be denied. This must be acknowledged.

Third, evidence.

It must also be acknowledged that there is no independent evidence of Jesus's existence outside the New Testament. All external evidence for his existence, even if it were fully authentic (though much of it isn't), cannot be shown to be independent of the Gospels, or Christian informants relying on the Gospels. None of it can be shown to independently corroborate the Gospels as to the historicity of Jesus. Not one single item of evidence. Regardless of why no independent evidence survives (it does not matter the reason), no such evidence survives. We must accept this fact.

Then it must be acknowledged that the book of Acts is very unreliable. The evidence for its fabrication and revision of history is extensive and beyond reasonable dispute now. It must also be acknowledged that we cannot establish that it has any sources relating to the historical Jesus other than the Gospels. We can speculate that it does. But we cannot establish that it does. Even apart from the fact that it looks like what other sources it did have, did not know of a historical Jesus recently executed for crimes against the state and with a family still living, but only of a celestially revealed angel, with no state felony conviction on his record and no known biological relations on earth. You can remain blind to that evidence if you must. But even then, Acts still affords no provable corroboration of the existence of Jesus independent of the Gospels.

Then it must be acknowledged that the Gospels are extensively mythical in their literary construction. They look like novels designed to preach messages, not record testimony. They look exactly like extended parables. They do not match historical biographies but insofar as they match biographies at all, they match the biographies of other mythical people, like Osiris or Romulus or Aesop or Oedipus or Dionysus or Moses or Daniel. They are filled with historical improbabilities in every chapter. Their scenes and chapter structures are engineered with symbolic intent. Their stories are constructed by emulating other myths (from Homer to the Septuagint). And nothing in them that pertains directly to Jesus existing is corroborated by any other external source, other than the Epistles composed before them.

It must also be acknowledged that all attempts to ‘extract’ knowable (rather than speculated) historical facts about Jesus from the Gospels have failed to do so by any logically valid method. The method of criteria cannot operate on the Gospels as we have them, in the context of what evidence survives. There may be historical facts in them. But we have no means to distinguish which claims in them are mythical and which historical. They all look the same: they all serve each author’s aims equally. For if they did not, the author would not have included them. Because the Gospels are not disinterested or critical records. They are deliberately engineered sectarian propaganda.

Penultimately, it must be acknowledged that, since we have no other evidence, since the Gospels are too contrived and impenetrable to extract any certain history from, and no other evidence exists independent of them, the entire debate as to whether Jesus did exist as an actual historical man must center upon how we interpret the Epistles, and in particular the authentic Epistles of Paul (and perhaps Hebrews, 1 Peter, and 1 Clement, as being the only scriptures that plausibly aren’t second century forgeries).

And it must further be acknowledged that the authentic Epistles of Paul (as also Hebrews and 1 Peter and 1 Clement) are very weirdly ambiguous about Jesus ever spending any time on Earth. Or having been any sort of charismatic man whose effect on people and deeds in life were of any interest to any of his followers. This silence and ambiguity of Paul needs to be taken more seriously. Because it is obvious to far more people than the experts will merit. And this stalwart refusal to admit the obvious is beginning to discredit the entire field of Jesus studies in the eyes of the secular public. It’s even worse when secular scholars engage in Christian apologetics to deny it. But even just saying there is nothing odd about it, nor anything to explain, looks like a refusal to act like historians, and defending instead a cherished academic dogma. Similarly embarrassing is defending with fiery certitude the existence of non-existent documents, and insisting the evidence for historicity is exemplary or even overwhelming.

(For what? Grant money? Job retention? Conference placement? Friendly peer reviewers? A career free from trouble, threats, and peer

pressure? To not overturn a faith you desperately need? To not upset your believing wife or parents or siblings?)

And ultimately, the Academy must acknowledge other evidence that it has until now been intent on either ignoring, or ignoring the implications of.

This includes the fact that we have evidence of a Christian sect, a sect as old as the sect that wrote the Gospels, that did not believe Jesus actually lived on Earth. This evidence can be found indirectly in Ignatius, Irenaeus, and 2 Peter, and directly in the earliest redaction of the Ascension of Isaiah that we can presently reconstruct.

This includes the fact that we have evidence of a Christian sect, which traces back to the original Torah-observant sect that preceded Paul and was still called by that sect's original name (the Nazorians), that set the biography of Jesus in a completely different century of history, and that this is the only sect of Christians known to the Jews East of the Roman Empire – as evidenced by it being the only version of Christianity known to the compilers of the Babylonian Talmud.

This includes the fact that Philo extensively discusses a figure in pre-Christian Jewish angelology, a cosmic archangel who has all the same peculiar properties as the Jesus of the Epistles: the Image of God, God's agent of creation, the high priest of God's celestial temple, a pre-existent angel of God, and the firstborn Son of God, the sole being to whom God assigned Lordship over the universe, and whom we should emulate in ourselves. And the fact, also, that Philo identifies this angel with the figure in Zechariah 6 who happens to be named there Jesus the Son of God. Which establishes that Paul's Jesus was already a figure of pre-Christian Jewish angelology.

Lataster has examined these facts and concluded that even at the very best, with the most generous estimates, even more generous than mine, they warrant agnosticism about the historicity of Jesus, not certainty of his existence. I think the evidence goes farther than that. But I concur it certainly can't sustain the Academy's certitude.

Fourth, recovering objectivity.

Echoing Lataster's thoughts in the introduction, I believe academics in the field might be too close to the material to step back and ask, of every assumption they lead with in this debate, "Why do I even believe this?" Even when secular, the peers of this community remain too immersed in Christian faith assumptions to be objective.

Consider Mark Goodacre, who is no evangelist or apologist. Whatever his faith, his attitude toward scholarship is as secular as any secularist. And his knowledge and expertise in the field is superlative. And yet, when we debated the topic on London radio in 2014, even he was certain that 1 Corinthians 15 contained the phrase "from those who were in Christ before him" as Paul's stated source for his gospel. No such line exists there. Or anywhere in any of the letters of Paul.

How is it possible that so eminent an expert in the New Testament could be so convinced that such a verse existed? There can be only one explanation: he was told that it existed in his collegiate training, and never questioned what he was told. Because it was presented to him as 'the consensus'. Thus Christian faith assumptions remain throughout the field, and are taught to its scholars, who don't know the difference between them and facts. Because they are never told there is a difference. It's just a part of the package of 'consensus knowledge' that Paul said he received his gospel "from those who were in Christ before him". Never mind that that has never been true. And that no one ever bothered to check. Despite the fact that in Galatians 1, Paul swears up and down that he *didn't* receive his gospel "from those [who were in Christ] before him". A fact, just as oddly, that no expert seems to notice.

So we have a field full of experts, following a consensus containing false statements they've never checked, and which also omits contrary facts that challenge that very consensus. We have a consensus that believes Paul said the exact opposite of what his letters plainly say. This should disturb every member of this community. And it should warn you to stop relying on that consensus, and start questioning. Start asking, "Does Paul

actually say that?" You should be asking, of *everything* you think is 'the consensus', the same universal question: "What actually *is* the evidence for this assumption or that?" and "Why do we all believe this so fervently? Why do we even believe it at all?"

Until you are willing to question all consensus assumptions, so as to begin purging the Christian faith assumptions and stubborn institutionalized dogmas hidden among them, and therefore willing to either present logically sound evidence for them or else abandon them, you are not fit to have an opinion in this debate. So become fit. Go back to the drawing board and re-examine all the evidence anew, without preconceived notions. Then be honest. Admit what you see. Admit what you don't.

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[1] He had earlier published a short review of it in an academic journal.

[2] Quote from John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. xi.

[3] For my own catalog of their errors see: Richard Carrier, "Ehrman on Historicity Recap" (published on 24 July 2012 and continually updated) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/1794; "Critical Review of Maurice Casey's Defense of the Historicity of Jesus" (3 March 2014) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/4282.

[4] At http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/5730.

[5] See Richard Carrier, "McGrath on the Amazing Infallible Ehrman" (25 March 2012) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/749; "McGrath on OHJ: A Failure of Logic and Accuracy" (5 March 2015) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/6817; "McGrath on the Rank-Raglan Mythotype" (6 March 2015) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/6840. Possibly that series will continue.

[6] His false claims about the content of my book are documented in Richard Carrier, "In Which James McGrath Reveals That He Is a Fundamentalist Who Has Never Read Any Contemporary Scholarship in His Field" (11 September 2015) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/8331. He did the same thing in his faulty review of *Proving History*. See: Richard Carrier, "McGrath on Proving History" (10 September 2012) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/2522. McGrath has done this so routinely now that I have had to conclude he is deliberately lying. For he cannot possibly be that incompetent.

[7] For all of these, see Richard Carrier, "Okay, So What about the Historicity of Spartacus?" (5 July 2015) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/7924.

[8] On which see Richard Carrier, "Kenneth Waters on OHJ: The Society of Biblical Literature Debate" (24 March 2015) at http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/6917.

[9] Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason For Doubt* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), pp. 547-548.

[10] While I am the lead author, Carrier has contributed the foreword, the afterword, and much feedback, and has also helped with editing and clarification.

[11] It is perhaps more popularly known as the Christ Myth Theory, which is a terrible name, for several reasons. The most obvious being that secular scholars already see *Christ* as a 'myth'. It is the existence of the Historical *Jesus* that we are questioning.

[12] Robert Eisenman is undoubtedly a proper scholar, and employed, and yet his views are often very 'fringe'. For example, see Robert H. Eisenman, *The New Testament Code: The Cup of the Lord, the Damascus Covenant, and the Blood of Christ* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2006).

[13] To relate the latter to the current conundrum, consider the following response to your claiming that the methods and assumptions of geocentrists (those funny folk who think that the Sun revolves around the Earth) are fallacious: "Well 99.9% of geocentrists think you're wrong!"

[14] We shall avoid the temptation to fallaciously conclude that if Jesus' ancestors didn't exist, then he didn't either. Fabricated genealogies would not necessarily be conclusive. They are also featured in numerous religious traditions.

[15] I do this in the proper peer-reviewed academic channels and I also write and present for the public on all these issues. One scholar remarked that I am a 'one-man wrecking crew' against Christianity and theism, though that is not my intent. I merely evaluate Christian/theistic

claims, which is a just and defensible activity of a Religious Studies scholar. You can find much of my scholarly and popular-level work at www.RaphaelLataster.com. For my brief analysis (a greater one is forthcoming) of Craig's resurrection argument, see Raphael Lataster, "A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of William Lane Craig's Resurrection of Jesus Argument," *Think* 14, no. 39 (2015): 59-71.

[16] A mythicist is apparently someone who endorses mythicism, the view that Jesus did not exist. So that we can avoid pretentious accusations about mythicists 'not getting' what 'myth' means, let us be charitable and assume that in this context, to call something 'mythical' is to say that it is not literally true.

[17] As with my earlier book, this one is self-published. There is much reasoning behind this, such as the rapidity in disseminating this information. Note also that publishing proper is no guarantee of quality as we can see by examining Maurice Casey' book on the topic, and any book by a Christian apologist that is published by the prestigious Oxford University Press. If you are still concerned, remember that just about everything I claim here has been published in the peer-reviewed academic literature. In fact, this alludes to another reason why this book is self-published; this is an easier and cheaper way, for most people, to access my arguments. Furthermore, this book has actually been checked by several scholars.

[18] A fellow 'outsider' seemed to agree. See Alvar Ellegård, "Theologians as Historians," *Scandia* 59, no. 2 (1993): 169-204. He argues that the 'insider' scholars are very different from other historians, demonstrating (via a comments section in this paper) that the latter are more likely to see the mainstream view as "largely hypothetical" rather than "established fact"; they demonstrate the same sort of detachment that I argue is so vital in this investigation. Ellegård also notes how the supposed oral traditions behind the Gospels may have been about others, and argues that Jesus has much in common with the earlier Teacher of Righteous (the Habakkuk Pesher is oft-appealed to). He also recognises that mainstream Gospel dating (which I have charitably accepted, though it too is uncertain) is very much reliant on the assumption that Jesus lived, and that he died around 30 CE. There is clearly some circularity in the methods of mainstream Historical Jesus researchers!

[19] I include analytical philosophers for their ability to identify faulty reasoning. Clearly something of great benefit when examining the methods of mainstream Historical Jesus researchers. Also, the lines here can be a little fuzzy, based on the overlapping borders of academic disciplines at certain educational institutions. There are several Religious Studies and Ancient History scholars for example, like my historicist frenemy John Dickson, who are actually New Testament/Historical Jesus specialists.

[20] Carrier works in the broader field of Ancient History, and sees the New Testament as essentially no different than other collections of classical books that ancient historians study. It should not be privileged by critical scholars because it 'comes from God' or because of its role in shaping Western society.

[21] Ill-motivated, I think, due to the symbiotic relationship between these secular scholars of the Bible, and Christians. It may seem counter-intuitive for the latter to fund the former, but these scholars do add some legitimacy to the Bible in contemporary times, meaning that we should not necessarily overlook the financial incentives of all parties involved. Consider that large numbers of atheist scholars are essentially saying that much of the material in the New Testament is historically accurate, with many of them shying away from addressing the implausible miraculous claims, as apparently historians can't deal with them. We Bayesians, or probabilistic analysers, think otherwise.

[22] See John H. Stokes and Donald M. Pillsbury, "The effect on the skin of emotional and nervous states: III. Theoretical and practical consideration of a gastrointestinal mechanism,"

Archives of Dermatology and Syphilology 22, no. 6 (1930): 962-993. Even earlier, Russian zoologist Élie Metchnikoff thought that the intestinal microbiome played an important role in our health. For those interested in the topic, I shall elaborate in another project. Another example: I engaged the services of a tiler to tile the walls of my renovated kitchen. Initially intending to cover the floor of the kitchen with linoleum, I stupidly asked him if tiles would be a better option. His response was that it would be, but then, he would think so. Because he's a tiler. He even had the honesty to point that out! While it is possible that tiles would have made for a more appealing floor covering (alas, I could not afford such a luxury), it is obvious that his answer cannot be determined as being completely divorced from his passion for tiling and his financial incentive. We can certainly expect most tilers to prefer tiles, most geocentrists to believe in geocentricity, most theoretical physicists to find theoretical physics very interesting, most theologians to believe in God, and most Historical Jesus researchers to declare that the so-called Historical Jesus certainly existed. None of this would be surprising. What would be surprising is if there are a few dissenters that do not go along with the consensus, which we can see with the likes of Robert M. Price. We could also consider the conflict of interest concerning athletes betting on their own games, or doctors selling the medicines they prescribe, or doctors overprescribing antibiotics due to the expectations of paying customers.

[23] I am well placed to display such cynicism. As a former pharmacist, I am quite aware of certain legal-but-possibly-unethical practices of pharmaceutical companies, which may include 'evergreening'. In a capitalist society, it is always healthy to question if such providers of goods and services truly aspire for our optimal health, or are more concerned with financial profit.

[24] Whilst arguing for an interdisciplinary approach, he also endorses alternative analyses of the sources, and finds Historical Jesus researchers to be presuppositionalist. Pieter F. Craffert, "Caretakers, Critics, and Comparativists: A Meta-Analysis of Historical Jesus Research," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 25, no. 2 (2012): 111-135.

[25] John Gager also bemoans the reluctance of the mainstream scholars "to consider insights from other disciplines." See John G. Gager, "The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 272.

[26] Such as a Richard Carrier. Of course, if he can now be considered such an expert, he certainly was not when he began investigating.

[27] Leaving open the door to highly logical and critical philosophers, such as a Stephen Law.

[28] Such as a Hector Avalos, or myself. Note that truly objective scholars of religion are especially valuable, as they do not privilege particular religions, or their sacred scriptures.

[29] Consider this useful resource on the lack of objectivity in much of the research undertaken about religion: William Arnal, Willi Braun, and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2012). Of particular note are the comments, "There seems little doubt that such questions are more apropos in the study of Christian origins in which Christian theology and Christian scholars are so pervasive. Many scholars of the historical Jesus seemed bound by theological constraints or have theological agendas, such as creating an image of Jesus that would still allow Christians to be followers of Jesus… many, or even most, of these scholars imagine a Muhammad or a Jesus who either bears a remarkable resemblance to the Muhammad or the Jesus of their respective confessional tradition, or who is made religiously significant in some other (fashionable) way", and, referring to Christian origins, "the majority of those in the field hail from religious backgrounds and likely entered the discipline with theological baggage if not an agenda", on pp. 112-115. Interestingly, regarding the latter quotation, Bart Ehrman was specifically named. The book also includes

Donald Wiebe's warnings against crypto-theology (that many scholars are covertly apologising for religion).

[30] This incidental mention contrasts with the grand claims made about apparently 'incidental mentions' of Jesus found in Josephus and elsewhere, which we shall later discuss. For the quotation, see the soon to be published Sarah Balstrup, "Interpreting the Lost *Gospel of Mary*: Feminist Reconstructions and Myth Making," *Literature & Aesthetics* 25, no. 1 (2015).

[31] I make it very clear, throughout, that prominent historicists seem completely unable to argue logically. If they can't even make good arguments for Jesus' existence, I struggle to comprehend why they should be considered experts on this particular issue.

[32] Raphael Lataster, "The Gospel According to Bart: The Folly of Ehrman's Hypothetical Sources" (paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Historical Association, Sydney, 7th July 2015).

[33] There is an ongoing debate about how certain secular scholars of religion effectively practice crypto-theology. See Raphael Lataster. The Religious Studies Project. "Is There a Christian Agenda Behind Religious Studies Departments?," accessed 18/02/2013, http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2013/01/23/is-there-a-christian-agenda-behind-religious-studies-departments-by-raphael-lataster/.

[34] Genesis 22:17.

[35] Both of our recent books are starting to become referenced (non-negatively!) by mainstream scholars, in their academic books. For example, see Hector Avalos, *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), p. 10, n. 41.

[36] Anti-religious or not, while believers and secular historicists alike have ulterior motives for supposing Jesus' historicity, Carrier and I do not wish that there was no Jesus. It truly is a separate question. As for our relative lack of bias, I must raise the fact that Carrier has recently come out as polyamorous. I.e. He is an ethical and responsible non-monogamist. I knew that there would be at least one critic who would try to use that against him, and against his case for Jesus' ahistoricity. Sadly, I was correct, and it turned out to be my friend, Australian apologist Robert Martin, who desperately claims that Carrier now has one more reason to doubt Jesus' existence – clearly alluding to the desire to avoid accountability. See Robert Martin. Robert Martin. "The potential bias of Richard Carrier," accessed 16/06/2015, https://atheistforum.wordpress.com/2015/03/12/the-potential-bias-of-richard-carrier. Why meticulously examine someone's arguments when you can just resort to cheap *ad hominem* argumentation? This also seems a little strange, given the famed polygamy of many of the Judeo-Christian patriarchs, and the fact that many Christians alive today are polyamorous.

[37] It is our arguments that are relevant.

[38] See the previous footnote. Continue to re-read as required.

[39] If you are of the opinion that evidence doesn't matter, you may as well stop reading. Whether evidence is important or not, which is a whole other discussion, this book tries to describe what we can reasonably infer from the evidence.

[40] For example, certain aspects of the Gospels might indicate purposes other than to present historical information. Also, the poor evidence of the Gospels, relative to better-attested historical figures, can negatively affect the probability of historicity. This sort of thinking about reader bias and counterfactual probability is likely something that Carrier will discuss further in future.

[41] The bullying of those suffering from intellectual inertia will not cause me to accept the status quo, somehow becoming convinced that the case for the Historical Jesus is now,

miraculously, unquestionable. It could only encourage me to move on from this topic, which I had always planned to do anyway. Only evidence can sway the honest seeker after truth. I may continue on here, if there is yet more interesting work to be done, and to support the few scholars that bravely stand up to the erroneous consensus. A thought should be spared for those scholars who dare to question Islamic paradigms. It is a regrettable truism, due to concerns over political correctness and personal security, that it is more acceptable to attack the central tenets of Christianity than to do the same for Islam. One noteworthy example is that of Islamic theologian Muhammad Sven Kalisch, who was relieved from his position as chair for Islamic pedagogy at The University of Münster, for doubting the existence of the Prophet Muhammad. See Katharina Völker, "A danger to free research and teaching in German universities? The case of Sven Muhammad Kalisch," in *The Teaching and Study of Islam in Western Universities*, ed. Paul Morris, et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 175ff.

[42] When I need to criticise the likes of Ehrman, who I generally appreciate and agree with, and am necessarily labelled as 'fringe', you can rest assured that I am not working in this area out of enjoyment or for the hampered career prospects!

[43] Raphael Lataster. The Conversation. "Weighing up the evidence for the 'Historical Jesus'," accessed 31/12/2014, http://theconversation.com/weighing-up-the-evidence-for-the-historical-jesus-35319.

[44] Raphael Lataster. The Washington Post. "Did historical Jesus really exist? The evidence just doesn't add up.," accessed 31/12/2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/18/did-historical-jesus-exist-the-traditional-evidence-doesnt-hold-up/.

[45] Hector Avalos. Debunking Christianity. "Raphael Lataster's New Book on Jesus Mythicism," accessed 22/06/2014, http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com.au/2013/09/raphael-latasters-new-book-on-mythicism.html.

[46] Christopher Hartney, review of *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism*, by Raphael Lataster, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 171-174.

[47] Carole M. Cusack, review of *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism*, by Raphael Lataster, *Literature & Aesthetics* 23, no. 2 (2013): 105.

[48] Faith and cultural pressures, and not just facts, have their roles to play, to varying degrees.

[49] William Arnal, Willi Braun, and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2012). Particularly interesting – concerning Islam but echoing New Testament research – is Herbert Berg's assertion that scholars of Islam "are reproducing, in a scholarly voice, the basic theological claims of the Muslim tradition's presentation of its origins" (p. 123).

[50] And there are copious numbers of footnotes with all sorts of helpful background information about the various religions and mythologies discussed herein.

[51] Note that there will necessarily be significant overlap between the major sections. We are, after all, dealing with the same sources.

[52] Sometimes the temptation to write like real people talk is too great, however, particularly in a book written for the benefit of real people.

[53] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. xxviii.

[54] Helmut Koester, "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Situation of the Quest: An Epilogue," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 544.

[55] Atheists would obviously see it as very unlikely that the Celestial Jesus exists, even if the Celestial Jesus theory is more plausible than the theories concerning the Gospel Jesus or the Historical Jesus.

[56] In my other work, which would certainly be considered more 'anti-Christian', I happily assume Jesus' historical existence and focus on other critical issues such as miraculous claims, God's existence, and the lack of justification for religious exclusivism.

[57] John Dickson. ABC. "It's Beginning to Look a lot Like Christmas ... Mythicism's in the Air," accessed 31/12/2014, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/12/24/4154120.htm.

[58] And, not insignificantly, both camps produce naturalistic hypotheses that are vastly more probable than Christian hypotheses about Jesus, which appeal to the supernatural. Think about that one. It is the greatest irony for the Christian to accuse the mythicist of being irrational or crazy.

[59] Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), p. 114.

[60] Ehrman also agrees that Christianity could "survive quite well without a historical figure of Jesus". See Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), p. 337.

[61] Others would prefer to say that virtually everyone agrees on Jesus' historicity and only disagree on what he really said or did. I think that understates it a little. Jesus as a mere man would seem very different to Jesus as God! I prefer to say that we atheists all agree that the Christ of Faith did not exist, and we only disagree as to whether there was a Historical Jesus. If this seems less reasonable than the former, consider that, crazy as it may seem, it is far more likely that people simply invented Jesus whole cloth, than that there was a divine man who walked on water and effectively raised himself from death. I.e. We have a partial fabrication hypothesis versus a total fabrication hypothesis, with both being far more plausible (they are naturalistic, after all), than the "it is all true" hypothesis. Also, I prefer to simply look at the various concepts and theories about Jesus, and judge how likely they are to be true. There is nothing illogical or inappropriate about that approach.

[62] Ehrman (DJE), p. 263. On p. 336, Ehrman adds, "as new Jesuses come to be invented and then pass away". And he is referring to different scholars' interpretations – the upper-level 'Historical Jesus' and the 'Biblical Jesus' are even more different. Also see p. 143.

[63] Ibid., p. 336.

[64] The third book will be a comprehensive refutation of the best arguments for God's existence, and will also discuss the implausibility of miraculous claims.

[65] It would be dishonest to act as if there would be absolutely no effect to the greater debate, especially with regards to polemics. In fact, I am beginning to see the uses in briefly mentioning Jesus' possibly not existing with regards to arguing against the resurrection, as 'total fabrication' is more likely than 'it all happened', even if it is less likely than 'partial fabrication'. We don't need to go there however, as 'it all happened' is so exceedingly unlikely even if we assume a Historical Jesus.

[66] Questioning Jesus' historicity will certainly be relevant in debates with Christians if it ever becomes mainstream.

[67] Some liberal Christians don't require God, a Biblical/Gospel Jesus, a Celestial Jesus, or even a Historical Jesus. They are effectively atheists who are also 'cultural Christians'.

[68] A word of advice to those arguing with apologists: avoid saying that Jesus did not exist. Assume he did, and move on.

[69] While many will enjoy having a laugh at the expense of an Atwill or Acharya S, these amateur mythicists somehow never need to appeal to the supernatural for an explanation…

[70] Note that while most Biblical scholars are – unsurprisingly – Christians, and thus cannot be expected to be completely objective, even many of the atheistic scholars are former Christians, and still may carry some of the associated baggage. Indeed, many of them de-converted while intensely studying the Bible, and obviously would have several reasons for holding on to what they could. Think of the non-believing pastors that still preach, because they don't have alternative qualifications and don't know what else to do with their lives. But perhaps, in time, they will continue to become more sceptical about Jesus.

[71] Actually, when it comes to the existence of a loving god and similar matters, I would love to be proven wrong.

[72] Paul Tillich saw religion as revolving around people's ultimate concern. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). Consider that the Historical Jesus may actually be he ultimate concern of certain historicist scholars, so that they are religious, in a sense. Other, lay, atheists may feel a very strong attachment to a less supernatural Jesus.

[73] Trevin Wax. The Gospel Coalition. "Jesus is His Own Ideology: An Interview with Nick Perrin," accessed 23/07/2012, http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax/2009/04/01/jesus-lost-in-transmission-an-interview-with-nick-perrin/.

[74] Mark S. Goodacre. The Bible and Interpretation. "Admitting our Ignorance about the Historical Jesus," accessed 18/06/2015, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/goodacre1.shtml.

[75] Thomas Brodie, *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Memoir of a Discovery* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012).; Hanna Daych. NLTimes. "Jesus didn't exist, but a "myth", says banned pastor," accessed 24/03/2015, http://www.nltimes.nl/2015/02/08/jesus-didnt-exist-myth-says-banned-pastor/.; John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999). Consider also the example of 'Christian Atheist' Frank Schaeffer, who thinks that evidence – regarding religion – is beside the point. See Frank Schaeffer, *Patience with God: Faith for People Who Don't Like Religion (or Atheism)* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2009). We could also look to the example of Raymond Brown, as a Christian willing to question the historical claims of the Gospels. As a Religious Studies scholar, I am very aware of all this. This current project, however, is concerned with answering a historical question, so evidence is very much necessary.

[76] As a scholar of Religious Studies, I certainly see them as Christians. Just of a different kind, like how the ISIS/DAESH supporter is a different kind of Muslim.

[77] Despite the prominence of these scholars, these are really popular-level books. Contrast this with the peer-reviewed books and articles published by Carrier and myself.

[78] Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 9.

[79] Ibid., pp. 10-11. Schweitzer famously criticised many biblical scholars who seemingly allowed their own motives to affect the objectiveness of their research, accusing them of 'modern theology' masquerading as historical research. These scholars search for Jesus but find themselves! Moxnes takes this idea further, noting the cultural and political influences of the countries these scholars hailed from. See Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth Century Historical Jesus* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2012). See also James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London: Routledge, 2014) and James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[80] Witherington (JQ), p. 11.

[81] It is noteworthy that much of the earlier historical Jesus research was undertaken in Germany during a time of rabid anti-Semitism. See Fernando Bermejo Rubio, 'The Fiction of the 'Three Quests': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historiographical Paradigm', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2009), p. 216.

[82] My use of religious terms in describing the methods and attitudes of these non-religious scholars is very much intentional. As we shall discuss throughout, they serve a crypto-theological or religious agenda.

[83] Ehrman (DJE).

[84] Richard Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012).

[85] Raphael Lataster, "Jesus Scepticism: An Examination of the Arguments for Various 'Jesus as a Myth' Theories" (Master's thesis, University of Sydney, 2013). It was published proper in late 2012, and 'officially' in January 2013.

[86] Raphael Lataster, "Bayesian Reasoning: Criticising the 'Criteria of Authenticity' and Calling for a Review of Biblical Criticism," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2013): 271-293.; Raphael Lataster, "Questioning the Plausibility of Jesus Ahistoricity Theories — A Brief Pseudo-Bayesian Metacritique of the Sources," *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 63-96.; Raphael Lataster, "The Fourth Quest: A Critical Analysis of the Recent Literature on Jesus' (a)Historicity," *Literature & Aesthetics* 24, no. 1 (2014): 1-28.; Raphael Lataster, *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013). As earlier noted, though a popular and self-published book, the latter is effectively peer-reviewed and has been praised by academic reviewers, for its content, and for its delivery.

[87] Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[88] Carrier (OHJ).

[89] For the professional book reviews, see Raphael Lataster, review of *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, by Bart Ehrman, *Literature & Aesthetics* 24, no. 2 (2014): 137-138.; Raphael Lataster, review of *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?*, by Maurice Casey, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5, no. 1 (2014):166-168.; Raphael Lataster, review of *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*, by Richard Carrier, *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 614-616.

[90] Paul N. Anderson. The Bible and Interpretation. "A Fourth Quest for Jesus… So What, and How So?," accessed 20/06/2014, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/fourth357921.shtml.

[91] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 11-13.

[92] Part III is irrelevant and Part II is simply terrible. In Part II, Ehrman deals with mythicists' claims, whilst holding on to his Gospel-influenced presuppositions. He is unable to even consider that opposing theories – which often assume the Gospels are not intended to portray accurate historical events – might be true (namely, the Celestial Jesus theory), so that he never comes close to a fair analysis. For example, many of Ehrman's 'refutations' sound like '*xxx* is wrong because we know from the Gospels that…'.

[93] Also, historicists like Ehrman often criticise mythicists for quoting scholars that disagree with them. This is absurd, and hypocritical, as this practice is par for the course in scholarship, or anywhere, really. Logic dictates that few people agree in all things. It is also unfair because the criticism would be greater if mythicists only referenced other mythicists. Which they do indeed get criticised for. Damned if you do, damned if you don't, if you're a mythicist.

[94] Ehrman (DJE), p. 2. On pages 11-12, Ehrman again notes that the Historical Jesus is not the Biblical Jesus.

[95] Ibid., p. 4.

[96] Ibid., p. 7.

[97] Ibid., pp. 15-16.

[98] Ibid., p. 16. Scholars have been fired for far less blasphemies, such as Michael Licona's being relieved from his duties for suggesting that the Gospel story of the Jerusalem zombies (Matthew 27:52-53) might not be literal.

[99] One of these other considerations is the impact of Christian financial support on the field. See Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

[100] Ehrman (DJE), p. 19.

[101] Ibid., p. 3.

[102] Ibid., p. 36.

[103] Ibid., pp. 37-38.

[104] This ironically includes Ehrman, who, as we shall see, doesn't tell us how probable Jesus' historicity is, or how he knows this. He doesn't even outline a method that can properly address the issue.

[105] Ehrman (DJE), p. 39.

[106] Ibid., p. 42.

[107] Ibid., pp. 42-46.

[108] Ibid., p. 47.

[109] Ibid., p. 48.

[110] As sources after that cannot be considered independent and reliable, and should surely be seen as derivative. But he even admits that this could also apply to the sources within 100 years. See ibid., p. 50.

[111] Ibid., pp. 51-56.

[112] Ibid., p. 52.

[113] Ibid., pp. 53-54.

[114] Ibid., pp. 55-56.

[115] Ibid., p. 56.

[116] Ibid., p. 68. Even more criticisms, such as these references being far from objective, are offered on pp. 66-68.

[117] Ibid., p. 59.

[118] Ibid., p. 60.

[119] Ibid., p. 60.

[120] Ibid., pp. 60-61.

[121] Ibid., pp. 61-65. Some of these defences are incredibly illogical, such as on pp. 64-65 where Ehrman asserts that the passage is somewhat restrained, and that if the whole passage were fraudulent, it would include even more flamboyant Christian claims, akin to the Christian apocryphal stories about Jesus. It is beyond obvious that a Christian pretending to be a Jewish historian would be a little more restrained! This is also silly for the simple reason that what the forger did end up including was flamboyant enough for the likes of Ehrman to realise that forgery had taken place.

[122] Ibid., pp. 65-66.

[123] Ibid., p. 351.

[124] Ehrman again mentions on p. 97 that the Tacitean and Josephean references to Jesus ultimately derive from Christian claims, and notes that "they do not give us information that is unavailable in our other sources." Despite this, he counter-intuitively asserts that these references provide "independent attestation to Jesus' existence from outside the Gospels". Much of this peculiar development relies on his deference to imaginary sources, which we shall discuss at length in the following section. Nevertheless, his inability to reason logically is exposed as he says that "it is impossible" to know if the Christians who informed our non-Christian scholars had been influenced by sources Ehrman has already discussed, and that "it is completely possible that they themselves had simply heard stories about Jesus". It is inexplicable that he could then move on from mere possibilities to certainty over independent attestation, and that his editors also failed to notice these errors of logic.

[125] Ehrman (DJE), p. 179. Also see pp. 70-71.

[126] Ibid., pp. 73, 179.

[127] Ibid., pp. 268-269.

[128] Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 56-57.

[129] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 76-78.

[130] Ibid., p. 82.

[131] Ibid., pp. 72-74.

[132] Ibid., p. 73.

[133] Ibid., p. 136. This also seems to argue against the speculative criterion of embarrassment (we shall discuss this later), which he himself endorses. If scholars can't speculate about the author's thoughts and intentions, how can they speculate about what the authors would find embarrassing?

[134] Ibid., p. 75.

[135] Ibid., p. 75.

[136] Some scholars will not appreciate the sort of tone implied by the use of 'imaginary' in this context. In my defense, it is extremely hard to avoid sounding smug or sarcastic when

explaining to lay audiences that the highly trained – and highly paid – experts derive their certainty from sources that do not actually exist, and thus divert attention away from sources that do actually exist. The atheistic reader can expect this from Christian apologists, but should not expect – or tolerate – this from secular experts.

[137] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 75-78. Later, on p. 141, Ehrman reveals some uncertainty, by referring to canonical and non-canonical gospels as "either entirely or partially independent". Surely 'partially independent' means 'not independent', just as 'near-contemporary' means 'not contemporary'.

[138] Ibid., p. 292.

[139] Since we do not know the original authors, we may as well try to be gender-inclusive.

[140] Interestingly, Ehrman earlier expressed some reservations about such hypothetical sources, alluding to some scholars' grand claims about them, focussing on Q, but also noting that "[w]e are even less informed about the sources designated M and L." See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 75-77. He also inadvertently explains how unnecessary such hypothetical sources are, since variant forms of Mark could explain Matthew and Luke's differences: "It is not certain, however, that Matthew and Luke had Q in precisely the same form: they may have had it in slightly different editions. The same could be true of their other source, the Gospel of Mark."

[141] For a thorough treatment against the existence of the popular and hypothetical Q source, and confirmation that dispensing with it is not a fringe position, see Mark S. Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002). Other scholars also think that there is no need for Q or other (i.e. oral) hypothetical sources, that Luke simply copied Matthew, and that unique material may be the inventions of the authors. See Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989). Also see Allan J. McNicol, David L. Dungan, and David Barrett Peabody, eds., *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew: A Demonstration by the Research Team of the International Institute for Gospel Studies* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996). There are many more. Please note that I need not comprehensively argue against the existence of Q, or similar hypothetical sources. I am more concerned with the fact that such sources are unnecessary to explain the evidence we have, that they divert attention away from sources that do exist, and that if these sources existed, they cannot be judged as being reliable.

[142] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 78-79.

[143] Unfortunately, 'possibly' is often taken to mean 'probably' and even 'certainly' by both secular Jesus historicists and Christian believers.

[144] See Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God - Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

[145] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 78-83.

[146] Ibid., p. 81.

[147] Bart D. Ehrman. Newsweek. "What Do We Really Know About Jesus?," accessed 02/01/2015, http://www.newsweek.com/what-do-we-really-know-about-jesus-63427.

[148] Bart D. Ehrman. Christianity in Antiquity (CIA). "Discrepancies That Pay Rich Dividends," accessed 01/01/2015, http://ehrmanblog.org/discrepancies-that-pay-rich-dividends/.

Ehrman is asked if Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount and Ehrman replied “Probably not”, in a comment dated 05/10/2014.

[149] Ehrman (NT), p. 87.

[150] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 73-74.

[151] Ibid., pp. 72-73.

[152] Ibid., p. 128.

[153] We have focussed on *natural fictions* in these hypothetical sources, because natural fictions present a bigger challenge to the historicist. One example of a hypothetical source that contains *supernatural fictions* is the Signs Gospel apparently used by the author of the Gospel of John. This source allegedly includes the transformation of water into wine and the raising of Lazarus.

[154] Ehrman (DJE), p. 79.

[155] Like apologists do when answering the unknown with “God”. Yes, another parallel between these secular historicists and the fundamentalists they despise (and ironically try to liken to mythicists).

[156] Ehrman (DJE), p. 79.

[157] Mainstream scholars already know that the Gospels are anonymous, made obvious by such publications as Randel Helms, *Who Wrote the Gospels?* (Altadena, CA: Millennium Press, 1997).

[158] Gilbert J. Garraghan and Jean Delanglez, *A Guide to Historical Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1946), p. 168.

[159] Louis Reichenthal Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 165.

[160] Ehrman (DJE), p. 338.

[161] Ibid., p. 82.

[162] See Stephen Law, “Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2011): 129-151.

[163] One could attempt to argue that the hypothetical sources must be reliable due to the reliability of the resulting Gospels. Not only is the latter untrue, this is clearly reasoning in a circle (i.e. “we know A because of B and we know B because of A”), and makes the positing of hypothetical sources in the first place to be completely redundant.

[164] Meaning ‘journal of Paul’. That would certainly be interesting to have! Note that I opted against using a colleague’s creative but wholly unscholarly and unnecessarily inflammatory suggestion, *F U Ehrman*. Apparently, the ‘F’ means ‘fiction’, the ‘U’ means *ur* (original/primitive), and the ‘Ehrman’ pays homage to the field’s greatest conjurer of imaginary sources. As we shall soon see, I have a much more polite way of immortalising Ehrman’s approach.

[165] Compare this with the *Rubrum Pumilio*, which, if genuine, belongs at the front of the Bible, and reads: “To my darling Candy, all characters portrayed within this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental”. See Ed Bye, “Better Than Life,” in *Red Dwarf* (London: BBC, 1988), television program.

[166] Ehrman now acknowledges that Philo’s *Logos* is basically Jesus Christ. Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), p. 75. This, his most recent book, seems to add much to the case of

mythicism, whilst adding nothing useful to the case of historicity! I half expect that Ehrman will soon join the growing ranks of Historical Jesus agnostics/mythicists.

[167] The Old Testament, for example. It is obvious to non-Christians that the reason Old Testament prophecies appears to be fulfilled in the life of Jesus is that the Gospel authors simply constructed the stories that way, drawing on the Old Testament teachings and prophecies. Put simply, they 'lied'. You didn't really think Jesus fulfilled all those prophecies, did you?

[168] Robert J. Miller, "When It's Futile to Argue about the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 88.

[169] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 211-212.

[170] Ibid., p. 230.

[171] Contemporary examples include Discordianism and the Church of All Worlds. See the work of a scholar who literally wrote the book on invented religions: Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). Interestingly, adherents of such New Religions, when pressed on the issue of authenticity and legitimacy, are certainly not precluded from appealing to various sources of tradition. See Beth Singler, ""SEE MOM IT IS REAL": The UK Census, Jediism and Social Media," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 7, no. 2 (2014): 150-168. See also James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Also useful, regarding the invention of traditions in general, is Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[172] Ehrman (DJE), p. 83.

[173] Ibid., p. 83.

[174] For example, see Casey (JEAMM), p 65.

[175] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 83-86.

[176] Ibid., p.86. The context makes clear that he is talking about his imaginary written sources.

[177] This would be similar to believers thinking that God exists because the Bible says so; the Bible can presumably be trusted because God wrote it. There is quite a bit of circular reasoning going on here.

[178] Ehrman (DJE), p. 85.

[179] Ibid., p. 85.

[180] Ehrman has written a little bit about the unreliability of the New Testament texts. For a sample, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).; Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).; Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).; Ehrman (NT).; Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).; Ehrman (Forged).

[181] Ehrman (DJE), p. 86. Interestingly, the last scholarly reference of the chapter was made on p. 83. I see nothing but "pure speculation".

[182] Note that there is disagreement about whether this (same goes for Colossians 1:15-20) passage is actually a hymn. See Benjamin Edsall and Jennifer R. Strawbridge, "The Songs we Used to Sing? Hymn 'Traditions' and Reception in Pauline Letters," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37, no. 3 (2015): 290-311.

[183] Acts can effectively be seen as the sequel to Luke's gospel.

[184] See Ehrman (DJE), p. 238.

[185] Somewhat similarly, in his most recent book, Ehrman acknowledges the lack of information about the Earthly Jesus of the Gospels in Paul's writings, and uses such silences to argue that the Gospel stories about Joseph of Arimathea were later fabrications. Why then not see essentially all of the Gospel stories as later fabrications? See Ehrman (HJBG), pp. 89, 141.

[186] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 87-92.

[187] Ibid., p. 91. This sort of vague language is somewhat necessary, since Ehrman doesn't actually know when Jesus died. He also doesn't know when Jesus was born. The sources are that bad. Let us not be too hopeful that they'll give us certainty over what Jesus said and did. Note that all these temporal matters are questionable, especially as these hypothetical oral sources cannot now be analysed. I also suspect that this absurd approach could not really aid Ehrman's case, as Jesus' existence, birth-date, and death-date, are some of the things being questioned. There certainly seems to be an air of presumption and circular reasoning about all this.

[188] See ibid., p. 206.

[189] Ibid., p. 93.

[190] I use this example because many apologists erroneously think that the case for Jesus is superior to the case for Caesar, and that doubting Jesus' historicity means that we would have to doubt everybody's.

[191] There are too many good books on Julius Caesar to mention. For a convenient anthology of sources concerning Julius Caesar and other important Roman leaders, see Ronald Mellor, *The Historians of Ancient Rome: An Anthology of the Major Writings*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013). There are also apologists who claim that there is far more evidence or Jesus than for Tiberius Caesar. This is ridiculous, given that there exists much contemporary evidence for Tiberius, and none for Jesus. Note also that while we obviously cannot expect contemporary coins depicting Jesus' face, no evidence is still no evidence.

[192] There is some interesting and convincing work on this. For example, see Idan Dershowitz et al., "Computerized Source Criticism of Biblical Texts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 2 (2015): 253-271.

[193] This is very similar to 'form criticism', which, in line with many of my criticisms of Ehrman's law, has become less prominent in Old Testament studies. As with minimalism, it surely is only a matter of time for New Testament scholars to catch on.

[194] It could have also been called Bultmann's law. Note that Ehrman is apparently working on an entire book about Jesus' imaginary sources, with a focus on oral traditions. The very name (and chapter headings) suggest that he is well aware of false memories and the need to rework information to suit one's community, so it will be interesting to see him explain why we can trust any of his imaginary sources. He seems to be writing at an extraordinary pace, which may explain why his latest books are illogical and ignorant of much of the contradicting evidence. They also are supported by few references. Contrast this with the likes of Carrier and myself, who spent years writing our books on this topic, and include copious and at times overwhelming amounts of scholarly references and wordy footnotes, like this one. It is as if Ehrman simply relies on his (self-serving) presuppositions and his (self-proclaimed) status as an expert…

[195] Richard A. Burridge, "Jesus: His life, ministry, death, and its consequences," in *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press,

2013), pp. 28-32.; James D. G. Dunn, *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

[196] William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p. 363. Note the irony that the 'sources behind the Gospel of Peter' are appealed to, yet they contradict the 'sources behind the canonical gospels', in having Herod Antipas condemn Jesus to death, rather than Pontius Pilate. They also display hints of Docetism.

[197] See Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 82.; Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), pp. 206-214.; Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 610-618.

[198] As we shall see in the next major section of this book, Maurice Casey also relied on hypothetical sources. Stephanie Fisher is another who is happy to appeal to imaginary sources. See Stephanie Louise Fisher. "The Jesus Process: Stephanie Louise Fisher, an Exhibition of Incompetence: Trickery Dickery Bayes," accessed 23/08/2012, http://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com/2012/05/22/the-jesus-process-stephanie-louise-fisher/.

[199] Ehrman (DJE), p. 235.

[200] Ibid., p. 235. One scholar who holds to the latter position is Gordon Fee. See Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

[201] Ehrman (DJE), p. 246.

[202] See Mark 6:31-44, 8:1-9, Matthew 14:13-21, 15:32-16:10, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:5-15.

[203] He is of, of course, not the only one. The appeal to hypothetical sources is completely illogical and idiosyncratic, and I find it very disturbing that it is so pervasive in Historical Jesus research.

[204] Ehrman (DJE), p. 92.

[205] Ibid., p. 93.

[206] Ibid., p. 91.

[207] We shall later see how Paul makes it pretty clear that he is discussing a purely Celestial Jesus; a figure far removed from the Jesus of the Gospels. Perhaps the possibly-once-existing hypothetical sources underlying Paul's epistles make this even more explicit. I am yet to see why imaginary sources that Ehrman prefers should be given preference.

[208] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 98-105.

[209] Ibid., p. 98.

[210] Ibid., p. 101.

[211] Ibid., p. 102.

[212] Ibid., p. 103. And this, despite him acknowledging on the very same page that "there are allusions to traditions that made it into the Gospels".

[213] Yet another example of how philosophical/logical training is useful in examining claims about Jesus' historicity or non-historicity. In other words, those outside the 'relevant fields' potentially have much to offer, despite historicists' irrelevant protestations.

[214] *Rashomon* is a classic Japanese film, directed by the celebrated filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, which presents different (typically contradictory and self-serving) perspectives.

[215] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 104-105.

[216] Ibid., pp. 106-113. On p. 117, Ehrman refers to the “the speeches of Acts” and “the narrative of Acts” as if they were separate sources. This is getting increasingly absurd. We could just as easily say that each chapter in a Harry Potter book provides yet another independent witness to Potter’s existence. The popular *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels may provide an even better example, as multiple characters’ viewpoints are presented.

[217] Ibid., p. 106.

[218] Ibid., pp. 107-108.

[219] Ibid., p. 109.

[220] Ibid., p. 109.

[221] Ibid., p. 109.

[222] Ibid., p. 262.

[223] Ibid., pp. 113-115.

[224] Ibid., p. 113.

[225] Ibid., p. 114.

[226] Ibid., pp. 115-117.

[227] Ibid., pp. 116-117. More examples will be discussed in later chapters.

[228] Ibid., p. 106. Note that some of the New Testament’s 27 books go completely unmentioned. However, Ehrman is generally correct in focussing primarily on the Gospels and the Pauline epistles.

[229] Pease note that dating the Biblical books is very difficult, and scholars often disagree.

[230] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 106.

[231] James 1:1.

[232] James 2:1. Note that in this verse (and also James 1:2), James, who may be James the Just, refers to his fellow Christians as brothers and sisters. This may become relevant in one of the battles over a key passage found in the Pauline epistles.

[233] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 117-118.

[234] Ibid., p. 118.

[235] Ibid., pp. 119-123.

[236] Ibid., p. 130.

[237] Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), p. 38.

[238] 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16.

[239] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 122-123.

[240] He even spoke about being an observant Jew, and about being “all things to all people”. That certainly seems to preclude any hatred for any racial or ethnic group, particularly the Jews. See 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

[241] Ehrman (DJE), p. 123.

[242] For example, Ehrman is happy to accept an interpolation in 1 Corinthians 14:34-37. See ibid., pp. 353-354.

[243] See 1 Corinthians 2:6-8. We shall examine this passage later. Some historicists may feel that a more literal reading is appropriate, since the Jewish council condemned Jesus to death (again, according to the later texts). However, many scholars see the trial/s parts of the Gospels as historically implausible anyway.

[244] I think this less likely, with the interpolation possibility being more probable. Jesus seems to be placed among the prophets, who were killed on Earth, in a passage that seems eerily similar to Acts 7:52. Perhaps that passage is what inspired this interpolation.

[245] Galatians 1:12.

[246] Ehrman (DJE), p. 122.

[247] Ibid., p. 120.

[248] This entire passage may ironically be a later interpolation, as we shall later discuss in detail. If that is the case, it would be a forger, a liar, who is telling us that he is not lying.

[249] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 125-129. He continues this fallacious reasoning throughout his section on Paul's Epistles.

[250] Euhemerisation refers to creating a real person out of a fictional godly being. This is not to be confused with – though it strangely often is – deification, which is sort of the opposite. Interestingly, this proposed euhemerisation seems to have happened twice, in a sense. Later Christians brought a purely Celestial Jesus down to Earth. Further on in the timeline, scholars removed the more implausible elements of the story to create an even more 'human' Jesus.

[251] Ehrman (DJE), p. 125.

[252] Ibid., p. 128.

[253] Ibid., pp. 128-129. Paul is not the only epistle writer to fail to mention Jesus' return when mentioning his "coming", as we shall later see. In other words, the authors might not believe that Jesus was previously on Earth, which would directly contradict the Gospel/traditional view.

[254] Ibid., p. 128.

[255] Ibid., p. 130. The other mention to this passage, also without appealing to "hard evidence", is on p. 111.

[256] Ibid., p. 144.

[257] Ibid., pp. 144-156. It is worth noting that the descriptions of these figures in Paul's writings are entirely compatible with minimal mythicism.

[258] Marcus J. Borg. Huffington Post. "A Chronological New Testament," accessed 21/04/2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcus-borg/a-chronological-new-testament_b_1823018.html.

[259] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 156-170.

[260] This harks back to my thoughts on the various Christianities that have existed, and could exist in future. Not all Christians need a Historical Jesus or Gospel Jesus to continue being Christians. Interestingly, Ehrman acknowledges that "One could easily argue that Christianity would survive quite well without a historical figure of Jesus"; it could certainly have originated that way also. See ibid., p. 337.

[261] Contrast with his, and every atheist's, position regarding the apparently fulfilled prophecies about Jesus. These links were obviously fabricated. Somehow, the inconsistent Ehrman cannot entertain the notion that Jews would fabricate a suffering messiah, which would eventually lead to the creation of Jesus.

[262] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 163-164.

[263] Ibid., pp. 159-164.

[264] There are many clear parts of the Old Testament that could have *inspired* the idea of a messiah going through hardships, such as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 – it is irrelevant if the word 'messiah' is not used. And all objective scholars, including Ehrman, in relevant fields already agree that the Old Testament inspired or influenced the New Testament writings, at least to some extent. I.e. the apparently fulfilled prophecies concerning Jesus, which to an atheist, indicates fabrication.

[265] Indeed, the basic history of religions reveals that faiths and religions continually evolve.

[266] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 214-215.

[267] Note that Jews (and Christians) seemed quite comfortable with noble – or even ignoble - lies, with many Biblical mentions of God (and Jesus) lying and/or condoning lying. For but a handful of examples, see Genesis 27, 1 Kings 22:23, Jeremiah 4:10, 20:7, Ezekiel 14:9, 2 Thessalonians 2:11, John 7:8-10.

[268] See Ehrman (HJBG), p. 66.

[269] Even Ehrman admits that Matthew wanted to portray Jesus as a "new Moses", citing numerous examples. See Ehrman (DJE), pp. 198-199. On p. 200 he sees Luke as doing something similar. On p. 207, he acknowledges: "They [*the Gospels*] do indeed contain nonhistorical materials, many of which are based on traditions found in the Hebrew Bible". Unfortunately, Ehrman seems unable to comprehend that, while this doesn't disprove Jesus' existence, the more content in the Gospels that can be explained in this way, the less we can be sure over their historical reliability, and the less need there is for Ehrman's brand of imaginary sources. In the Old Testament, we have *actual* sources. Also, Ehrman actually describes a scenario of Jewish (though not necessarily messianic) expectations around Jesus' time, concerned with God bringing them victory, on pp. 225-226.

[270] See ibid., p. 167.

[271] I am not just being snarky here. I actually have no intention of appealing to hypothetical sources, and am simply making a point. If Ehrman and his fellow historicists can simply invent foundational sources for the documents we actually have, can use such terrible methods selectively and inconsistently, and can assume that all this somehow confirms their views, why can't Jesus ahistoricists do the same?

[272] Ehrman (LC). This book explains the vast diversity very early on in the faith's history. For a more general and accessible overview of Christian heresies, see Jonathan Wright, *Heretics: The Creation of Christianity from the Gnostics to the Modern Church* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

[273] Ehrman (DJE), p. 359.

[274] Ibid., pp. 225, 271-288.

[275] Ibid., p. 275.

[276] Ibid., pp. 360-361.

[277] Even if we limit this figure to Jews of Palestine, then we still have the religious views of an extraordinary number of Jews unaccounted for. Ehrman indicates that this figure would be around one million. See ibid., pp. 66, 351. Were all of these 1 million Jews of one mind? Were they also all of sound mind? Perhaps one hallucinated…

[278] More on this later. Just know that not all scholars rule out Philo's (and Plato's) influence on Paul, which should surely raise doubts as to the necessity of a Historical Jesus. Note that Ehrman tries to dismiss the idea that Paul was influenced by Plato's view of the world, without evidence, of course, yet admits that Platonic ideas seem to have found its way into the deutero-Pauline Hebrews. See ibid., pp. 255-257. One mainstream scholar that sees the obvious influence of Pagan thought on Christianity is Marian Hillar. See Marian Hillar, *From Logos to Trinity: The Evolution of Religious Beliefs from Pythagoras to Tertullian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). He makes no bones about his thoughts on Philo's role in the development of Christianity, focussing on the *Logos*: "By developing this doctrine he fused Greek philosophical concepts with Hebrew religious thought and provided the foundation for Christianity, first in the development of the Christian Pauline myth…" See Marian Hillar. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E.—40 C.E.)," accessed 27/04/2015, http://www.iep.utm.edu/philo/. For more on Paul's being influenced by Greek philosophy, see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000) and Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989). That Paul and other Christian authors would be influenced by Greek philosophy/mythology/literature should be uncontested, given that they are writing in Greek. What do naïve apologists think that these educated authors learnt at 'Greek school'? The Greek language, and nothing else?

[279] Geoffrey William Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: K–P* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 333.

[280] A popular view among certain Gnostics. See Elaine H. Pagels, "'The Demiurge and His Archons': A Gnostic View of the Bishop and Presbyters?," *The Harvard Theological Review* 69, no. 3-4 (1976): 301-324.; Elaine H. Pagels, "Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology: Irenaeus' Treatise vs. the Excerpts from Theodotus," *Harvard Theological Review* 67, no. 1 (1974): 49.; Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 47-71. Interestingly, some (typically 'Gnostic') believers, such as the Manicheans, saw the 'serpent' of the Adam and Eve tale in Genesis as being Jesus, in a classic inversion of the story. See Iain Gardner and Samuel N. C. Lieu, eds., *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 17. Indeed, it would seem that the god seeking to keep his people in ignorance is evil (Yahweh shares this tale with Zeus), while the tricky angel (Prometheus the fire thief? Lucifer the 'light bringer'? Jesus?) who attempts to impart knowledge on mankind is the hero, particularly if they suffer for it.

[281] Ehrman (LC), p. 15.

[282] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 165-166.

[283] Ibid., pp. 170.

[284] 1 Corinthians 1:22-29.

[285] Ehrman (DJE), p. 254. The further implication on this page (and surrounding pages) that because not all ancients believed in Celestial realms (where Doherty's Celestial Jesus was killed and resurrected), that none of them did, is pitifully fallacious. Doherty's thesis doesn't require everybody to think this way. A handful will do. And, on the every same page, Ehrman admits that "Plato and his followers" thought that "this material world is but a reflection" of the real world, and that Platonism was "popular at the time of Christianity". That other views, like

Epicureanism and Stoicism, were also popular at the time is entirely irrelevant. On the next page, he humiliatingly reinforces common mythicist speculations, thinking that he has come up with great points against mythicism. There are simply too many errors and ironies in Ehrman's book, to mention.

[286] Ibid., p. 193.

[287] Ibid., pp. 207-208.

[288] Ibid., pp. 217-218.

[289] Ehrman (HJBG), p. 50.

[290] Ibid., p. 69.

[291] This adds another level of irony to the debate, as historicists often accuse mythicists of positing conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorists are often so excited and passionate because, like many contrarians in general, they feel that they have access to special truths that the majority are ignorant of. Note also that if a concept is useful enough to believe, it may also be useful enough to fabricate. Furthermore, Ehrman does later admit that much of this counter-intuitive information was seen by Paul as God's wisdom, on p. 245.

[292] Ehrman (DJE), p. 165.

[293] Especially see Sanhedrin 98b, and also 93b.

[294] I'll leave it to readers to figure out which approach is more objective, neutral, and more likely to lead to the truth.

[295] Ehrman (DJE), p. 166.

[296] Isaiah 49:5-6.

[297] Other Biblical scholars agree that the suffering servant of Isaiah serves a redemptive/atoning purpose, which seems quite Messiah-like. For example, see Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 200-201.

[298] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 282-288.

[299] Ibid., p. 285.

[300] Interestingly, Ehrman's favourite Historical Jesus theory entails that Jesus is also an apocalypticist Jew. Did he, like the others, believe in the celestial Son of Man as well?

[301] Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 110.

[302] See Ehrman (HJBG).

[303] As discussed earlier, that they didn't is one of Ehrman's key points against the Celestial Jesus theory. Of course, he is demonstrably wrong on this point. That this celestial messiah would suffer is indicated by the very texts Ehrman must be alluding to when he describes this Jewish celestial messiah, as we shall later see. There are also several issues regarding Jesus' name that could help sway Ehrman's mind, which we discuss elsewhere.

[304] Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).; Martin Hengel and Daniel P. Bailey, "The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 75-146.; Alan J. Avery-Peck, ed. *The Review of Rabbinic*

Judaism: Ancient, Medieval and Modern (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 89-90.; Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

[305] See *4 Maccabees* 6, 17-18. We also find evidence of suffering being used for atonement in the Dead Sea Scrolls. See *1QS* 8.1-4.

[306] 1 Corinthians 15:3.

[307] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 173-174. Later, on p. 263, he refers to "the remarkably firm ground of virtual historical certainty" and "the fact of Jesus' existence".

[308] Ibid., p. 179. He also is happy to concede that believers could change their minds, to accept counter-intuitive concepts (such as a crucified messiah), so long as it suited them, on p. 240. Surely then, they were also capable of inventing such concepts whole cloth.

[309] Ibid., p. 170.

[310] Interestingly, Ehrman endorses the Criteria of Authenticity (which I shall critique in the next chapter), though he admits that different scholars can use them differently (hence the multiplicity of views about who the Historical Jesus really was). See ibid., pp. 288-293. He doubts the census of Quirinius because it isn't multiply attested, on p. 293. How he knows that there aren't multiple imaginary sources proving it historical is not explained, nor is it explained how the potentially many millions of sources for the miraculous claims in the Gospels don't mean that the miracles happened. It seems like Ehrman only imagines numerous hypothetical sources for the portions he wants to be authentic. He thus cannot reasonably argue for his own position, or against the positions of both mythicists and Christians. As evidenced throughout this section, Ehrman's methods are illogical, arbitrary, idiosyncratic, presuppositionalist, and flimsy.

[311] Ibid., p. 167. Incidentally, he was referring to Richard Carrier.

[312] Casey (JEAMM), p. 17.

[313] Ibid., p. viii.

[314] Ibid., pp. 10-36.

[315] Ibid., pp. 2-3. Bart Ehrman also thinks that an anti-Christian agenda drives mythicists. See Ehrman (DJE), pp. 336-339.

[316] Casey (JEAMM), p. 44. Given Casey's aggressiveness, and poor – while also dogmatic – case (as we shall see), the only fundamentalist he truly sees is the one staring back at him from the mirror.

[317] Ibid., p. 16. Casey then surprisingly insists that Doherty "was nonetheless brought up in an authoritarian environment", despite lacking evidence, and despite earlier acknowledging (on the same page, no less) that "Information about Earl Doherty is not readily available". He could have simply contacted Doherty, but that would have required effort. Like actual research does. And it gets in the way of lazy mud slinging.

[318] Ibid., p. 170.

[319] Clearly peer-review is not the be-all and end-all. Hence, we should focus on the arguments.

[320] For example, Casey discusses mythicist Robert Price's early involvement in a Baptist church, with no evidence of his ever being a Catholic and/or believing in Mary's perpetual virginity. See Casey (JEAMM), pp. 23-24. He also mentions Richard Carrier, who has never been a fundamentalist Christian or a Catholic. See ibid., pp. 14-16.

[321] For example, in my own sceptical work, I do not simply target internet bloggers or little-known amateurs. On the Biblical Jesus and God, I critique the work of Richard Swinburne,

Alvin Plantinga, and William Lane Craig. On the Historical Jesus, I focus on the few scholars that have recently published books on the topic of historicity, like Ehrman and Casey.

[322] Casey (JEAMM), pp. 43-45.

[323] Ibid., p. 62.

[324] Note that I do not use the term ‘amateur’ pejoratively. It is a technical term that I use to refer more to the lack of relevant academic qualifications and/or engagement with the Academy.

[325] Casey (JEAMM), p. 49.

[326] A dangerous term to use in the Academy. I cannot see it as anything but, however. Acharya S certainly is not representative of all Jesus sceptics.

[327] Casey (JEAMM), pp. 51-54.

[328] Ibid., pp. 52-53.

[329] Ibid., p. 75.

[330] Ibid., pp. 54-57.

[331] Ibid., p. 54.

[332] See Carrier (PH).

[333] Casey (JEAMM), pp. 62-63.

[334] He actually acknowledges that his dates differ from the conventional dates usually arrived at by Biblical experts. See ibid., p. 80.

[335] Ibid., p. 66.

[336] For example, biblical scholar and archaeologist David Freedman admitted to examining the Bible with “looser” standards. See Hershel Shanks, “How the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament Differ: An Interview with David Noel Freedman - Part 1,” *Bible Review* 9, no. 6 (1993): 34.

[337] Casey (JEAMM), p. 38.

[338] Ibid., p. 82.

[339] Ibid., p. 85.

[340] Ibid., p. 85.

[341] Mark 13:7-10.

[342] Casey (JEAMM), pp. 85-86.

[343] Ibid., p. 85.

[344] Ibid., p. 85.

[345] Ibid., p. 86.

[346] Ibid., p. 87. Emphasis mine. Does ‘could’ mean ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’?

[347] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

[348] Ibid., p. 90.

[349] Ibid., p. 90.

[350] Ibid., p. 93.

[351] Ibid., pp. 93-94.

[352] Ibid., p. 94.

[353] Ibid., p. 94.

[354] Ibid., p. 94.

[355] Ibid., p. 96.

[356] Ibid., pp. 114-115.

[357] Ibid., p. 96.

[358] Ibid., p. 96.

[359] Ibid., pp. 103-104. On p. 154, Casey again appeals to Luke's (actually unknown) credentials, referring to him as an 'ancient historian'.

[360] Ibid., p. 13.

[361] Ibid., p. 115.

[362] Ibid., p. 234.

[363] Ibid., p. 103.

[364] "Monkey magic, monkey magic…"

[365] A pen name of Stephen King.

[366] Casey (JEAMM), p. 109.

[367] Ibid., p. 130.

[368] Ibid., p. 194.

[369] Ibid., p. 108.

[370] See Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *Two Shipwrecked Gospels: The Logoi of Jesus and Papias's Exposition of Logia about the Lord* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), p. 543. Ehrman also lends some support to this notion. While his unlimited supply of imaginary sources led him to think that the Gospel of John is not based on the three Synoptic Gospels (which seems internally inconsistent since he earlier admitted that later authors *adapted* the stories as required), he does acknowledge that the matter of John's derivative nature is debated amongst scholars. See Ehrman (DJE), p. 259. I wonder if Ockham's Razor should lead us to suspect that John is indeed based on the other three Gospels, rather than unnecessarily inventing numerous non-existing foundational sources.

[371] Casey (JEAMM), p. 241.

[372] Ibid., p. 109.

[373] Ibid., p. 110.

[374] It focuses on the mission of the divine/Biblical (and obviously not historical) Jesus, while actually ignoring around 99% of Jesus' *life*.

[375] Casey (JEAMM), p. 242.

[376] Note that on the latter, differences could necessitate different genres, while on the former, differences are actually necessary and expected (otherwise they would be the same religions).

[377] The genre of Mark, and Burridge's work, shall be discussed in more detail later.

[378] Bart Ehrman is aware of the many similarities between Jesus and Apollonius, and admits that a "number of divine men were thought to have roamed the earth". See Ehrman (DJE), pp. 208-210.

[379] Casey (JEAMM), p. 154.

[380] Ibid., pp. 116-131.

[381] Ibid., p. 134.

[382] Ibid., pp. 147.

[383] Ibid., pp. 180-181.

[384] Galatians 1:12.

[385] Casey (JEAMM), p. 180.

[386] Ibid., p. 170.

[387] Ibid., pp. 173-201.

[388] Ibid., p. 181.

[389] Ibid., p. 188.

[390] Even Christian authors go some way to refuting Casey by noting the presence of numerous foreign influences throughout first-century Palestine, even if they – inexplicably and unreasonably – deny the impact of them on the Jews. See Paul R. Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 101-132. Somewhat similarly, whilst trying to argue that Galilee was very Jewish, Mark Chancey inadvertently admits that there were many Gentiles in Galilee. Let us not assume that these Gentiles could not have influenced any Galilean Jews. See Mark A. Chancey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 153-82.

[391] Casey (JEAMM), pp. 195-199.

[392] This seems to be made clear several times. See ibid., pp. 173-201. The quotation comes from p. 195. Compare this quotation, which is correct, with p. 188 where Casey makes the unjustified blanket claim that "In Judaism, demons lived in the underworld." Also particularly noteworthy, on p. 191 Casey concedes that it is reasonable to think that Paul, like many of his contemporaries, thought that the world was controlled by supernatural beings, often associated with planets. Surely this is more in line with Pagan and Hellenistic astro-theological thought than the normative monotheistic Judaism Casey espouses.

[393] Ibid., pp. 230-231.

[394] Ibid., p. 244.

[395] Ibid., p. 242.

[396] Ibid., p. 24.

[397] Ibid., p. 243.

[398] Ibid., pp. 230-231.

[399] See Kurt Noll, "Investigating Earliest Christianity without Jesus," in *'Is This Not the Carpenter?': The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus*, ed. Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 233-266.

[400] Casey (JEAMM), pp. 188-200.

[401] For instance, book titles are frequently misspelled. For some examples, see ibid., pp. 15, 24. I have already briefly alluded to his penchant for self-citation earlier, and there are even instances where he cites himself (even via block quotation), from this very book. For example, see p. 187, which unnecessarily quotes the very nearby p. 181. Even this is not done correctly,

with part of the quotation not to be found on p. 181, but coming from earlier in the book. The book is really a shambles.

[402] Ibid., p. 114.

[403] Ibid., p. 207.

[404] Ibid., p. 221.

[405] Ibid., p. 173.

[406] Ibid., p. 238.

[407] Ibid., p. 234. Casey was referring to the influential English philosopher Edward Carpenter, also claiming that he had "no relevant qualifications". Incidentally, Carpenter was referenced as simply noting that there physically wasn't enough time for all the pre-crucifixion events described in the Gospels to have happened. No special qualifications are needed to make that observation, which seems correct, and is widely accepted. Even Casey agrees while somehow disagreeing, saying that "like much of the proceedings before Pilate, it is historically not altogether plausible." Ummm… That's the whole point. It's not historically plausible. So Casey irrelevantly and cruelly pilloried an important LGBT activist, who also played some role in forming the UK's Labour party, when he technically agreed with him. What was he thinking? I suspect that the late Carpenter's only 'crime', apart from being a homosexual and a socialist (?!), was 'daring' to be referenced – decades after his death – by Acharya S, ensuring that he would be posthumously caught in the crossfire.

[408] Ibid., p. 13. Given Casey's respect for scholars from decent cricketing nations, his strange attack on Edward Carpenter becomes all the more surprising. There are no words.

[409] Also, the analytic philosopher in me just has to point out the possibility that these individuals might actually be excellent cricketers, despite their backgrounds.

[410] Funnily enough, as per the logic of the preceding footnote, I am personally not so skilled at cricket, being more devoted to football and rock-climbing.

[411] This is similar to the agnosticism over God's existence. Those agnostics do not need to have evidence that God does not exist. They just need to be unconvinced by the lack of good evidence for God's existence. In other words, my case for Historical Jesus agnosticism does not even rely on good alternative hypotheses, though it certainly can be strengthened by them. Asking uncommitted readers to read the poor work of Ehrman and Casey, so that they shall be convinced that the case for the Historical Jesus has been poorly made and that agnosticism is reasonable brings to mind the cheeky atheistic 'evangelical' tactic: to become an atheist, just read the Bible. All of it. Especially the bits you usually ignore.

[412] James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 191.

[413] Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1996), p. 27.

[414] David Barrett, "The Gospel According to Bart," *Fortean Times*, April 2007, p. 46.

[415] Bart D. Ehrman. The Huffington Post. "Did Jesus Exist?," accessed 12/04/2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html.

[416] Ehrman (LC).; Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1971).; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 56.; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 319.

[417] For example, see Quran 19:30-33.

[418] "The Jesus Seminar." Westar Institute. accessed 01/04/2012, http://www.westarinstitute.org/Seminars/seminars.html.

[419] Philip Davies. The Bible and Interpretation. "Did Jesus Exist?," accessed 11/09/2012, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/dav368029.shtml.

[420] For an example of Christianity's ability to suppress indigenous Pagan cultures in the Middle Ages, see Carole M. Cusack, "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission: 'Indigenous' Religion and 'World' Religion in the Early Middle Ages," *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 13, no. 1 (2011): 33-51.

[421] Mark 16:1-8.

[422] John 20:31.

[423] For McCutcheon's excellent edited introduction to the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion, see Russell T. McCutcheon, ed. *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999). One highlight is Bruce Lincoln's theses on method, which, concerned with historical research into religion, assert that "good conscience" should prevail over "good manners". They also indicate that some scholars may be overly defensive regarding others' religions, acknowledge that many scholars mistake the views of the "the dominant fraction" for the views of "the group" so that there is a misrepresentation "of those the scholars privilege as their informants", recognise the difficulties in "Understanding the system of ideology that operates in one's own society", argue that "The ideological products and operations of other societies afford invaluable opportunities to the would-be student of ideology" [compare this with my thoughts on the importance of outsiders to New Testament scholarship examining the issue of Jesus' historicity], imply that historians need to be critical though "it still offends many students of religion", and contend that the scholar who "permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood", amongst other things (such as failing to distinguish between truths and truth-claims), is no true scholar. See pp. 395-398.

[424] R. Joseph Hoffmann. The Bible and Interpretation. "Threnody: Rethinking the Thinking behind The Jesus Project," accessed 01/04/2012, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/hoffman1044.shtml.

[425] Avalos (EBS).; Richard Carrier. "Proving History!," accessed 01/04/2012, http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/255.

[426] "The Jesus Project." Center for Inquiry. accessed 01/04/2012, http://www.centerforinquiry.net/jesusproject.

[427] See Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* and Clinton Bennett, *In Search of Jesus: Insider and Outsider Images* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 172-174.

[428] "The Jesus Project." Center for Inquiry. accessed 01/04/2012, http://www.centerforinquiry.net/jesusproject.

[429] R. Joseph Hoffmann. The Bible and Interpretation. "Threnody: Rethinking the Thinking behind The Jesus Project," accessed 01/04/2012, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/hoffman1044.shtml.

[430] He later went on to initiate the *Jesus Process*. Despite the impressive name, it really just seems like a collection of blog posts, which seems ironic, given historicists' disdain for how mythicists disseminate their arguments. For those who are keen, I discuss the *Jesus Process* in an appendix in my Master's thesis. I find the posts by Hoffman, Maurice Casey, and Stephanie Fisher to be too mean-spirited, unconvincing, polemical, and amateurish to be even remotely interesting and worthy of refutation.

[431] R. Joseph Hoffmann. The Bible and Interpretation. “Threnody: Rethinking the Thinking behind The Jesus Project,” accessed 01/04/2012, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/hoffman1044.shtml.

[432] At this point, I have said enough about the popular ‘method’ of using non-existing sources that conveniently confirm our views.

[433] Ehrman (DJE), p. 37.

[434] Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 17-20.

[435] Leopold von Ranke, Sarah Austin, and Robert Arthur Johnson, *History of the Reformation in Germany* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1905), p. xi.

[436] Richard Carrier. “Did Jesus Exist? Earl Doherty and the Argument to Ahistoricity,” accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/jesuspuzzle.html.

[437] Garraghan and Delanglez (GHM), p. 168.

[438] Gottschalk (UH), p. 165.

[439] Robert M. Price and Luke Muehlhauser, *How to Study the Historical Jesus* (Luke Muehlhauser, 2010), Audio recording.

[440] Hershel Shanks, “How the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament Differ: An Interview with David Noel Freedman - Part 1,” *Bible Review* 9, no. 6 (1993): 34.

[441] Bart D. Ehrman and Michael Licona, *Debate - Can Historians Prove Jesus Rose from the Dead?* (Matthews, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), DVD.

[442] “One wonders if all these scholars came to a certain point and stopped, their assumption being, “If Jesus was a historical figure, he must have done and said *something*!” But their own criteria and critical tools, which we have sought to apply here with ruthless consistency, ought to have left them with complete agnosticism, which is where we have ended up.” See Robert M. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable is the Gospel Tradition?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 351.

[443] Cf. “I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist.” See Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner’s, 1935), p. 8. For more on this minimalist stance, see David Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 14.; Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: a Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 144-145.; Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989).

[444] For some discussion on Old Testament minimalism, see Megan Bishop Moore and Brad E. Kelle, *Biblical History and Israel’s Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011).; Thomas L. Thompson, “Is The Bible Historical? The Challenge of ‘Minimalism’ for Biblical Scholars and Historians,” *Holy Land Studies* 3, no. 1 (2004): 1-27. Thompson is also quite open to the idea of Jesus’ ahistoricity. Since Thompson suffered for being an Old Testament minimalist since the 1970’s, with many more scholars now willing to accept the ahistoricity of Moses and other Jewish patriarchs, he might be experiencing *déjà vu*.

[445] John G. Gager, “The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 258-259.

[446] James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 23.

[447] Eric Eve, “Meier, Miracle, and Multiple Attestation,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 1 (2005): 23-45.

[448] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 77-82. Note that Ehrman actually acknowledges that a common story among the Gospels is not necessarily multiply attested, hence the need for his imaginary sources. See pp. 290-291.

[449] John G. Gager, “The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 260.

[450] Carrier (PH), pp. 172-175.

[451] Charlesworth (THJ), pp. 20-22.

[452] See Luke 14:11. Cf. Matthew 20:16.

[453] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 292-293.

[454] Ibid., p. 292.

[455] See Matthew 12:49-50.

[456] Ehrman (LC).

[457] Christopher Tuckett, “Sources and Methods,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 132.

[458] Stephen Law, “Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2011): 129-151.

[459] Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 109.

[460] Carrier (PH), p. 124.

[461] Ibid., p. 156.

[462] John G. Gager, “The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 259.

[463] Ehrman (DJE), p. 302.

[464] In fact, the earlier Epistles support a humbled – then exalted – Jesus, as we see in Philippians 2:5-11.

[465] Ehrman (DJE), p. 325. Note that the Western Wall was an outer wall that surrounded the Temple Mount.

[466] Charlesworth (THJ), p. 24.

[467] Porter (CAHJR), pp. 79-82.

[468] John G. Gager, “The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 260.

[469] Craig A. Evans, *Life of Jesus Research: An Annotated Bibliography*, rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 128.

[470] Ibid., p. 128.

[471] I would certainly take the Gospels more seriously, if we at least knew who wrote them.

[472] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: HarperCollins, 2007).; J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit; The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins, 2011).; J. R. R. Tolkien, *A Middle English Vocabulary: Designed for Use with Sisam’s Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1925).; J. R. R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The History of Middle-Earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2002).

[473] See J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

[474] Ehrman (HJBG), pp. 96, 154.

[475] Carrier (PH), pp. 179, 180.

[476] John G. Gager, "The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 260-261.

[477] Carrier (PH), pp. 184, 185.; An example of the futility of determining authentic sayings by appeal to Aramaic context is provided by Maurice Casey, who thinks that the accurate Aramaic-to-Greek rendering of "girl get up" found in Mark 5:41 points to Jesus' authentic words. This is a *non sequitur*, as a correct translation says nothing about the individual origin of the quotation. The Septuagint, for example, contains hundreds of Greek translations of alleged quotations of Biblical figures (such as Moses), yet that does not cause modern scholars to definitively declare such figures historical. See Maurice Casey, "The Role of Aramaic in Reconstructing the Teachings of Jesus," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 1343-1376.

[478] Christopher Tuckett, "Sources and Methods," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 136.

[479] I constantly specify this, as some of the criteria are sound in and of themselves, but not soundly employed by Biblical scholars. They could work well for other historical questions, being deployed upon better evidence than what we have for Jesus. I will argue that for the question of Jesus' historicity, where evidence is so scant, a Bayesian approach is much more fruitful.

[480] Robert M. Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory and its Problems* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011), pp. 327-328.

[481] Rather than the more rational approach of seeing some bit of evidence as lending *some* support for or against, in a proper probabilistic analysis.

[482] Carrier (PH), p. 136.

[483] Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas: With Introduction, Notes, and Original Text Featuring the New Scholars Version Translation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1995), p. 109. The surrounding pages portray Jesus' *Carrie*-style rampage, killing, cursing, and blinding, left and right. This is obviously just way too embarrassing to be fabricated. Therefore we can know with 100% certainty that all this definitely happened. Definitely. Even the bit about Jesus' clay sparrows coming to life.

[484] John G. Gager, "The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 261.

[485] One notable example would be that of Gerd Theissen. See Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). Also see Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

[486] Crossan (HJ), p. xxviii.

[487] So says mainstream scholar Jens Schröter, in Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), pp. 51-52. For more scholarly criticisms of the Criteria, that book is an invaluable resource. See also Rafael

Rodríguez, “Authenticating Criteria: The Use and Misuse of a Critical Method,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7, no. 2 (2009): 152-167.

[488] Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), p. 16.

[489] John G. Gager, “The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 258-259.

[490] Avalos (EBS), pp. 69, 77, 91, 117.

[491] Ibid., pp. 292, 339.

[492] Hector Avalos and William Lane Craig, *The Resurrection of Jesus: Fact or Fiction?* (La Mirada, CA: Biola University, 2004), Audio CD.

[493] Richard Carrier. “Proving History!,” accessed 01/04/2012, http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/255.

[494] John G. Gager, “The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 244-245.

[495] Charlesworth (THJ), p. 18.

[496] Avalos (EBS), p. 119.

[497] It is not crucial to biographies of Caesar, for example, that he was divine.

[498] They are certainly not alone in supposing that certain scholars in this area modify methods in order to safeguard their views. See Stephen L. Young, “Protective Strategies and the Prestige of the “Academic”: A Religious Studies and Practice Theory Redescription of Evangelical Inerrantist Scholarship,” *Biblical Interpretation* 23, no. 1 (2015): 1-35.

[499] Polybius, *The Histories* 12.25a.1-2.

[500] One of the hints from the Gospel writers, perhaps, that the Gospels aren’t to be taken literally?

[501] Matthew 7:15-20. Cf. Luke 6:43-45 and Gospel of Thomas 45. There are also numerous Biblical passages indicating that just a little evil/uncleanliness contaminates the good/clean. For example, see Haggai 2:11-13, Galatians 5:9, 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, 15:33, 2 Timothy 2:20-22, and Matthew 16:6-12. And let us not forget the folksy wisdom that is ‘one bad apple spoils the barrel’, and the somewhat relevant ‘meglio solo che male accompagnati’ (better to be alone than to be in bad company).

[502] I am referring to the popular band’s hit song *Little Lies*, which contains the lyrics “Tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies”. Of course, religious lies are not always so ‘sweet’ and ‘little’. ISIS. Enough said.

[503] John 8:44. Cf. 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, which could imply that Satan portrays lies as truths. Genesis 3 also seems to indicate that Satan manages to deceive the faithful by mixing truths and lies.

[504] Stephen Law, “Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2011): 129-151.

[505] We could also use the criterion of embarrassment. The Harry Potter series tends to portray muggles (non-magical humans) negatively, as we can see from the stories of his early life in London with his abusive relatives. Given that the writer of the stories is also a muggle, she would no doubt find this embarrassing, so it must all be true…

[506] John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 630-631. And of course, we should then allow that the miraculous

traditions of other religions could be true too.

[507] Bart D. Ehrman and Michael Licona, *Debate - Can Historians Prove Jesus Rose from the Dead?* (Matthews, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), DVD.

[508] Robert M. Price and Luke Muehlhauser, *How to Study the Historical Jesus* (Luke Muehlhauser, 2010), Audio recording.; James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 56.

[509] Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Part the First, Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (London: R. Carlile, 1826), p. 49.

[510] John 3:1–21.

[511] Avalos (EBS), p. 119.

[512] Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), p. 109.

[513] For the record, I also would prefer that a loving God exists, and that – for personal and practical reasons – Christianity was indeed the true faith.

[514] Bart D. Ehrman and Michael Licona, *Debate - Can Historians Prove Jesus Rose from the Dead?* (Matthews, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), DVD.

[515] Ibid.; Ehrman (DJE), p. 42.

[516] Bart D. Ehrman and Michael Licona, *Debate - Can Historians Prove Jesus Rose from the Dead?* (Matthews, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), DVD.

[517] Ibid.

[518] Ehrman (DJE), p. 70.

[519] Ibid., pp. 77-82.

[520] Crossan (HJ), p. xxviii.

[521] John Dickson, *Life of Jesus: Who He Is and Why He Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), pp. 161-162.

[522] Price (CMTP) p. 426-427.

[523] Robert J. Miller, "When It's Futile to Argue about the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 88. Throughout the article, Miller also recognises how scholars can misuse the Criteria, and bemoans the privilege that many scholars grant to the Gospels.

[524] I'll make an exception for *cogito ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am. Surely we can say that we, as individuals, definitely exist, even if not in the way we currently perceive.

[525] For example, see Jan-Willem Romeyn, "Bayesian Inductive Logic" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Groningen, 2005).

[526] Swinburne (RGI).; Robin Collins, "The Teleological Argument: An Exploration of the Fine-Tuning of the Universe," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 202-281.; Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?: A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[527] Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[528] Raphael Lataster, "Bayesian Reasoning: Criticising the 'Criteria of Authenticity' and Calling for a Review of Biblical Criticism," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social*

Sciences 5, no. 2 (2013): 271-293. Also dabbling in Philosophy of Religion, I've used Bayesian reasoning to argue against Jesus' resurrection. See Raphael Lataster, "A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of William Lane Craig's Resurrection of Jesus Argument," *Think* 14, no. 39 (2015): 59-71.

[529] Carrier (PH).

[530] Ibid., back cover endorsement.

[531] Crossan (HJ), p. xxviii.

[532] Carrier (PH), p. 14.

[533] Ibid., p. 23.

[534] Ibid., p. 87.

[535] Ibid., pp. 26-30.

[536] Ibid., pp. 45-50. In this book, I will try to spare readers as much as possible, from the actual numbers and calculations.

[537] The prior probability is sometimes known as the 'base rate'. For the classic blue cab/green cab example illustrating the importance of prior probabilities, see Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Evidential Impact of Base Rates," in *Judgement Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, ed. Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 153-160.

[538] Carrier (PH), pp. 75-76.

[539] I am here referring to consequent (not prior or posterior) probabilities, also known as likelihoods, which reveal how probable it is for us to have certain evidence, given the truth of a theory.

[540] Carrier (PH), pp. 63, 286.

[541] Adam M. Schor, "Conversion by the Numbers: Benefits and Pitfalls of Quantitative Modelling in the Study of Early Christian Growth," *Journal of Religious History* 33, no. 4 (2009): 472-498.

[542] Carrier (PH), pp. 97-119.

[543] More on the work of these apologetic philosophers of religion in my upcoming book on God's existence.

[544] See M. J. Bayarri and J. O. Berger, "The Interplay of Bayesian and Frequentist Analysis," *Statistical Science* 19, no. 1 (2004): 58-80.

[545] For example, see Eugene Goodheart, "Is History a Science?," *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 2 (2005): 477-488.

[546] "To recognise you know when you know, and to recognise you do not know when you do not know, that is knowledge". From Confucius, *Analects* 2.17.

[547] There are scholars who seem to eschew this sort of sound, probabilistic reasoning, though it is unclear how they can then know which theories, from the many available, are more probably *true*, without appealing to their own opinions, and those of others, and without simply assuming the reliability of our belief-generating mechanisms. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and James B. Freeman, *Acceptable Premises: An Epistemic Approach to an Informal Logic Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[548] Consider the problem of other minds. Arguably, the only thing we can know with certainty is that we exist. We can't even be certain that our relatives, friends, and so forth exist; that they are not mere figments of our imagination. Of course, we might not exist as we perceive ourselves, but – as per René Descartes – we must exist in some form.

[549] Acts 12:21-23.

[550] This case study could easily be adapted to focus on Jesus' resurrection, and I do just that in my earlier book, the aforementioned article in the *Think* journal, and in my ongoing work (such as my upcoming book) on disproving Christian claims. I focus on Herod here, to prevent readers (apologists, actually) from conflating the issues and thinking that I believe Jesus didn't exist because I think the resurrection to be implausible.

[551] If this all sounds a bit Humean, it is because David Hume was thinking Bayesian. Hume provided some sound reasons for being sceptical about miraculous claims as early as the eighteenth century. Bayes' Theorem simply allows the scholar to confidently apply these principles, mathematically, in a fair and transparent manner, without assuming that miracles can *never* be proven.

[552] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 19.8.2.

[553] Helmut Koester, "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Situation of the Quest: An Epilogue," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, ed. Chilton and Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 541 ff.

[554] Avalos (EBS), p. 69-70.

[555] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 42-46.

[556] Ehrman (JAPNM), pp. 56-57.

[557] Bart D. Ehrman. The Huffington Post. "Did Jesus Exist?," accessed 12/04/2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html.

[558] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 77-82.

[559] Ibid., pp. 42-46. For a discussion of several archeological finds that some people think is evidence of Jesus, see the relevant appendix in my Master's thesis. These claims are so silly that there is no real need to republish my 'refutation' in this book. As for the lack of writings by Jesus, how scholars would wish they had a document written by Jesus himself, possibly containing statements such as "I am the son of Yahweh" or "it is regrettable that a few irrational people seem to think that I – a mere mortal – am able to perform miracles, thanks to the power granted me by a deity I do not even believe in". See Yeshua Bar-Yosef, *My Rather Insignificant Life* (Jerusalem: Sandy Temple Press, 0029), pp. 13, 666…

[560] Ibid., p. 48.

[561] Galatians 1:11-12.

[562] Avalos (EBS), p. 215.; John P. Meier admits this is the case with regards to Josephus and Tacitus, which are oft-viewed as the most significant extra-Biblical Historical Jesus sources: "As with Josephus, so with Tacitus our observations must be tempered by the fact that the earliest manuscript of the *Annals* comes from the 11th century." See Meier (MJ1), p. 100.

[563] Note that while there are mythologised accounts about Caesar (and other historical figures), they are incidental. Caesar is not now primarily known for being divine, for example. While some saw him as divine after his death, such embellishments are relatively unimportant. With Jesus, the mythological parts are not so easily dismissed; they are the point of the story, the very reason for its existence and importance. Furthermore, the likes of Caesar leave a 'secular'

imprint on the historical record, unlike Jesus, who we know about through his religious followers and supporters.

[564] Garraghan and Delanglez (GHM), p. 168.

[565] Gottschalk (UH), p. 165.

[566] Ehrman (DJE), p. 93.

[567] Pointing to Muslims memorising the Quran is anachronistic, but this is also a false analogy. This is not the accurate passing down of oral traditions, but the memorising of a written document.

[568] John G. Gager, "The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 254-256.

[569] Ibid.: 255.

[570] David Barrett, "The Gospel According to Bart," *Fortean Times,* April 2007, p. 47.

[571] Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament: What We Cannot Show, We Do Not Know* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), pp. 8-9.

[572] Ibid., p. 33.

[573] Ibid., p. 70.

[574] Ibid., p. 73.

[575] Ibid., p. 91. Note that these are only highlights. Neusner further criticises the presuppositions of New Testament scholars who appeal to these sort of imaginary sources.

[576] Earl Doherty, *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man* (Ottawa: Age of Reason Publications, 2009), pp. 503-507.

[577] Mark 6:14-15. With Jesus' fame, we might wonder why Judas' kiss was necessary. See Mark 14:43-45.

[578] Avalos (EBS), p. 212.

[579] However, I am open to the idea that Christians would have been embarrassed at such sources that mentioned a benign and non-divine Jesus, so destroyed them. This still makes the job for historicists very difficult.

[580] See Seneca's *Moral Essays* 6.20.3, and *Moral Letters* 101.10-14.

[581] From Seneca, *Moral Letters* 70.19-20.

[582] The point about miracles may seem unfair, as the Historical Jesus obviously didn't perform any. However, according to mainstream historicists, Jesus was *perceived* as performing miracles. Hence, we should expect some contemporary sources concerning this.

[583] I am well aware that the evidence we should expect for the Historical Jesus should be far less than for the Biblical Jesus. Still, Teutonic gladiators choking to death on their own shit? And no room for Jesus? Especially when he was *perceived* as performing wonders?

[584] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 98-104.

[585] Bart D. Ehrman. The Huffington Post. "Did Jesus Exist?," accessed 12/04/2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html.

[586] Take, for example, the Acts of Paul, which describes, among other things (like his time in the lion's den), Paul's death (the decapitation removes any doubt), and resurrection. What ridiculous claims. Clearly such a book can have no historical value…

[587] Marvin W. Meyer and Charles Hughes, eds., *Jesus: Then & Now - Images of Jesus in History and Christology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 73.; James M. Robinson, Christoph Heil, and Jozef Verheyden, *The Sayings Gospel Q: Collected Essays* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), p. 663.; Ehrman (DJE), p. 127.; Einar Thomassen, "'Forgery' in the New Testament," in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 143. Note that the Thomassen essay is also a good source about Christian forgery in general. Furthermore, the Gospel of Thomas manifests no interest in Jesus' salvific death and resurrection. See William Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3-4 (2011): 193-215.

[588] John G. Gager, "The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 245.

[589] Ehrman (DJE), p. 97.

[590] William Lane Craig, "Rediscovering the Historical Jesus: The Evidence for Jesus.," *Faith and Mission* 15, no. 2 (1998): 17.

[591] Bart D. Ehrman and Michael Licona, *Debate - Can Historians Prove Jesus Rose from the Dead?* (Matthews, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), DVD.

[592] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3.

[593] Doherty (JNGNM), p. 533.

[594] John 8:44.

[595] Doherty (JNGNM), p. 533.; Steve Mason, review of *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times*, by Alice Whealey, *Phoenix* 58, no. 3/4 (2004): 383-386.; John G. Gager, "Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 64.

[596] Meier (MJ1), p. 56ff. Note that the removal of the more implausible portions of the passage seems eerily similar to the aforementioned apologist tactic of 'bracketing'. We know that the text has been tampered with, so should be very cautious.

[597] See Origen's *Contra Celsum* 1.47, and *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17.

[598] Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus (c.e. 37–c. 100)," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume Three, The Early Roman Period*, ed. William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 911-912.

[599] Josephus also discusses less interesting and important religious matters in far more detail.

[600] Feldman agrees, declaring that a principal argument against the passage's genuineness is that the "passage breaks the continuity of the narrative, which tells of a series of riots". See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Books 18-19*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library 433 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 18.3.3.

[601] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 60-64. Interestingly, there is no record of Origen being aware of it, nor of Pamphilus, who was Origen's successor and Eusebius' mentor.

[602] Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 12.31.

[603] Eusebius, *Church History* 8.2.3.; There are many more indications of Eusebius' dishonesty and incompetence. Cf. Doherty (JNGNM), pp. 556-562. Note that even Christian scholars recognise the unreliability of Eusebius, and also that Christians carelessly copied and

even tampered with the texts. See Tim Dowley, ed. *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), pp. 75, 99.

[604] See Richard Carrier, "Origen, Eusebius, and the Accidental Interpolation in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 4 (2012): 492-494.

[605] Ken Olson, "Eusebius and the Testimonium Flavianum," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999): 305-322.; Ken Olson, "A Eusebian Reading of the *Testimonium Flavianum*," in *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations*, ed. Aaron Johnson and Jeremy Schott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 97-114.; Ken Olson. The Jesus Blog. "The Testimonium Flavianum, Eusebius, and Consensus (Guest Post) - Olson," accessed 12/06/2015, http://historicaljesusresearch.blogspot.com.au/2013/08/the-testimonium-flavianum-eusebius-and.html.

[606] Paul J. Hopper, "A Narrative Anomaly in Josephus: *Jewish Antiquities* xviii:63," in *Linguistics and Literary Studies: Interfaces, Encounters, Transfers*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 147-169.

[607] Gary J. Goldberg, "The Coincidences of the Emmaus Narrative of Luke and the Testimonium of Josephus," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 7, no. 13 (1995): 59-77. For obvious reasons, we shouldn't expect that Luke is here copying Josephus. After all, it is not Josephus who is the Christian evangelist. It seems more likely that a later Christian is embellishing Josephus' writings. Also note that with the varying composition dates for Luke's Gospel, Acts, Jewish Wars, and Jewish Antiquities, as well as numerous opportunities for later Christians to tamper with these texts, it becomes challenging to figure out who really wrote what, and who copied whom. Nevertheless, due to mistakes Luke makes, and for other reasons, it is more probable that Luke copied Josephus, and that later Christians made changes to Josephus' writings.

[608] Solomon Zeitlin, "The Slavonic Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls: An Exposé of Recent Fairy Tales," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 58, no. 3 (1968): 173-203.; See also Henry Leeming, "*Josephus slavonice* versus *Josephus graece*: Towards a Typology of Divergence," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 83, no. 1 (2005): 1-13.; Avalos notes that extant manuscripts of the Greco-Roman sources in general, date from mediaeval times. See Avalos (EBS), p. 215.; Meier supports the idea that manuscripts from Josephus and Tacitus are very late. See Meier (MJ1), p. 100.

[609] Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 776. Note that the contributors to the Josephus entry were Edith Mary Smallwood, who was a professor of History, and Tessa Rajak, a former professor of Classics. This seems to support my contention that specialist New Testament/Historical Jesus scholars are not who we should consult when it comes to objectively investigating Jesus' historicity.

[610] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1.

[611] Cf. Doherty (JNGNM), p. 572.

[612] R. Joseph Hoffmann. "The Jesus Tomb Debacle: RIP," accessed 26/08/2012, http://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com/2009/05/15/the-jesus-tomb-debacle-rip/.

[613] Doherty (JNGNM), p. 572.

[614] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 19.1.1.

[615] Carrier generally agrees, demonstrating that a Christian would have happily used "called Christ" instead of "was Christ", in an article where he formally and extensively argues

that the ‘second passage’ is most probably not authentic. See Richard Carrier, “Origen, Eusebius, and the Accidental Interpolation in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 4 (2012): 489-514.

[616] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.15, 8.5.3, and 10.11.1. Perhaps Josephus and Tacitus were interested in Euhemerism.

[617] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.2.1-2. Interestingly, Josephus spends more time discussing the implausible claims of obscure figures like Onias the circle-drawer than he does for Jesus.

[618] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 8.2.5.

[619] Consider Arrian, who shows the sort of criticism we never encounter in the Biblical texts: “This I record neither being sure of its truth nor thinking it altogether unreliable”. See Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* 2.12. And yet, this same Arrian illogically thought it good to use Pharaoh Ptolemy I as a source since apparently kings are much less likely to lie. See Arrian’s preface to *Anabasis Alexandri.*

[620] For example, see Detlev Fehling, *Herodotus and His ‘Sources’: Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns Publications, 1989). Perhaps we can doubt the anonymous and evangelical Gospel authors more than we doubt proper historians of the past.

[621] See Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* 3.3.

[622] See Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 1. Of course, critics could say that this text was intended to be fictional. That would certainly be an ironic criticism…

[623] Note that historians are well aware that ancient historians such as Tacitus and Josephus, like most people, occasionally made mistakes.

[624] Coincidentally and conveniently, we shall soon examine the alleged references to Jesus made by Tacitus and Suetonius.

[625] Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

[626] To be fair, we could overlook this as Tacitus is explaining why Christians are called ‘Christians’, though I still find it odd that this historian would not mention Jesus’ actual name.

[627] Ehrman (DJE), p. 54.

[628] Doherty (JNGNM), pp. 596-600.

[629] Ehrman (DJE), p. 56.

[630] Ibid., p. 56.; Cf. Doherty (JNGNM), pp. 594-596.

[631] Indeed, many would consider Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection to be the most significant events of all time.

[632] Luke 23:44-45.

[633] Matthew 27:51-54.

[634] Robert Drews, “The Lacuna in Tacitus’ *Annales* Book Five in the Light of Christian Traditions,” *American Journal of Ancient History* 1984, no. 9 (1984): 112-122.

[635] As we shall see in ‘his’ chapter of this book.

[636] Peter Michael Swan, *The Augustan Succession: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio’s Roman History, Books 55-56 (9 B.C.-A.D. 14)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 36-38, 188.

[637] Matthew 2:16-18.

[638] And the Bayesians among us will be justifiably suspicious that it is a handful of anonymous and less reliable texts that do discuss these alleged events. As for the privilege enjoyed by Christian texts, historians have long-known that "There can be little doubt that one of the major reasons for the loss of classical texts is that most Christians were not interested in reading them, and hence not enough new copies of the texts were made to ensure their survival in an age of war and destruction" and "Education and the care of books were rapidly passing into the hands of the Church, and the Christians of this period had little time for Pagan literature". See L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 48, 79.

[639] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 9.

[640] Meier (MJ1), p. 100.

[641] Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle* 2.29.

[642] Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle* 2.30.

[643] Paulus Orosius, *History against the Pagans* 7.9.4-6.

[644] Tacitus, *Annals* 6.28. Other ancient historians, like Tacitus' good friend Pliny, also mentioned the visit of the mythological creature.

[645] Julius Africanus, *Chronography* 18.1.

[646] Matthew 27:45-54, Mark 15:33, Luke 23:44-45.

[647] Cf. Doherty (JNGNM), pp. 647-651.

[648] Pliny, *Letters* 10.97.

[649] Ehrman (DJE), p. 52.

[650] Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.4.

[651] Jobjorn Boman, "Inpulsore Cherestro? Suetonius' *Divus Claudius* 25.4 in Sources and Manuscripts," *Liber Annuus* 61(2011): 376.

[652] Ibid.: 376. Boman also found, while surveying the writings of medieval chroniclers, that "most Christian works – Haimo, Reginon, Herman, Orderic, Flores Historiarum, Godfrey, Magnus (?), Sicard, Alberto, Riccobaldo and all the above-mentioned annals – allude to the Suetonian sentence *without* connecting it to Christ or Christianity".

[653] Ehrman (DJE), p. 53.

[654] Mara bar Serapion, *Letter to Serapion*. Mara's father and son shared the same name.

[655] Mark 14-15, Matthew 26-27, Luke 22-23, John 18-19.

[656] Matthew 27:12.

[657] Doherty (JNGNM), p. 655.

[658] Cf. Ibid., pp. 512-513.

[659] As even historicists can accept. See Ehrman (DJE), pp. 66-68. As we shall see in the following section of the book, Carrier believes that the Talmud, despite the late dating as a whole, might contain earlier remnants that could prove valuable in arguing for the (fictional) development of a radically different Jesus.

[660] For example, Jesus bar Gamaliel can be found in Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.4. Of particular interest is Jesus ben Ananias, who apparently prophesised the destruction of Jerusalem, several years before it happened. I guess one needn't have access to the divine to make the odd correct prophecy. See Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.5.3.

[661] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 137-138.

[662] While James might believe in a Celestial Jesus, like Paul (might), there seems to be a difference with Paul emphasising the death and resurrection (for everybody), and James holding out for more 'traditional' Jewish Messianic expectations – albeit one involving a celestial being.

[663] Matt Jackson-McCabe, "The Messiah Jesus in the Mythic World of James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (2003): 729.

[664] It would make sense for early Christians like James to believe in (invent?) a Celestial Jesus, given the impressive and seemingly insurmountable might of Rome. He would seem right to have done so; the Roman Empire flourished and endured for many more centuries!

[665] Matt Jackson-McCabe, "The Messiah Jesus in the Mythic World of James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (2003): 729-730.

[666] Ehrman (LC), p. 235.

[667] Einar Thomassen, "'Forgery' in the New Testament," in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. Lewis and Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 141.

[668] John 21:20-24.

[669] For various reasons, such as its later dating, John is typically seen as the less impressive/authoritative of the four canonical gospels. It seems to be reliant on the earlier Gospels, Acts, and the work of Josephus and other Jewish authors. See Bartosz Adamczewski, *The Gospel of the Narrative 'We': The Hypertextual Relationship of the Fourth Gospel to the Acts of the Apostles* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 2010). There are also some structural oddities in John, such as Jesus commanding everyone to leave and then chatting for the next three chapters. See John 14-18. In turn, Acts is very much reliant on the writings of Paul, and Luke's tendency to make things up as he goes. See Ryan S. Schellenberg, "The First Pauline Chronologist? Paul's Itinerary in the Letters and in Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (2015): 193-213.

[670] Consider the Last Supper, where Mark, unlike Matthew, certainly was not present.

[671] Additionally, many scholars associate Mark with Paul, who also never met Jesus, and, as per the above footnote, would also have missed out on the Last Supper.

[672] Ehrman (DJE), p. 42.

[673] Ehrman (LC), p. 235. Note that much of Ehrman's work is sound. My main criticism of him is his use of non-existing sources to support his otherwise unsubstantiated claim that there must have been a historical Jesus. I think that without that fallacious approach, he would be forced to proclaim an agnostic position.

[674] Mark 14:32-42, Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 22:45. There also seem to be many obvious mundane fictions with regards to Jesus' trial/s, which even Ehrman admits to. See Ehrman (DJE), p. 330.

[675] Ibid., pp. 70-73.

[676] Matthew 1:18-25, Matthew 14:22-36.

[677] Avalos (EBS), p. 119.

[678] As per Martin Dibelius' Law of Biographical Analogy, similar themes will crop up among different human cultures/mythologies/religions, without one obviously influencing another, since we all live on Earth and must contend with the human condition, with the same problems. This is an alternative to syncretism, whilst still serving as a natural – as opposed to supernatural – explanation.

[679] Ehrman (DJE), p. 48.

[680] Hershel Shanks, "How the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament Differ: An Interview with David Noel Freedman - Part 1," *Bible Review* 9, no. 6 (1993): 34.

[681] Bart D. Ehrman. The Huffington Post. "Did Jesus Exist?," accessed 12/04/2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html.

[682] John G. Gager, "The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 256.

[683] William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 75-76.

[684] The *Jesus Seminar* sought to gather scholarly and also lay opinions on the authenticity of various sayings and deeds of Jesus.

[685] Robert Walter Funk, "Bookshelf: The Resurrection of Jesus," *The Fourth R* 8, no. 1 (1995): 9.

[686] Surprising as it may be, mainstream Biblical scholar Burton Mack seems to agree that the Gospels aren't particularly good evidence for Jesus. See Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2001). In that book, Mack also indicates that the quest for the Historical Jesus has failed, that the quest for Christian origins has failed, that New Testament scholarship merely pretends to be an academic discipline, and agrees that such scholars have not come to agree on crucially important factors like data and methods. Note also that while I see the Gospels as somewhat 'neutral' on the issue, there are some facts that tilt the balance towards mythicism, I think, such as that they are the later documents, with the earlier Pauline documents presenting a much more otherworldly Jesus.

[687] Ehrman (DJE), p. 76.; Marvin W. Meyer and Charles Hughes, eds., *Jesus: Then & Now - Images of Jesus in History and Christology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 73. Some think that Thomas should be dated to the 50's, making it one of the oldest (if not the oldest) Christian texts. As with just about everything, scholars have not come to a consensus on this.

[688] Marvin W. Meyer and Charles Hughes, eds., *Jesus: Then & Now - Images of Jesus in History and Christology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 73.; Robinson (SGQ), p. 663.; Ehrman (DJE), p. 80.

[689] Ehrman (DJE), p. 56.; Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 127.

[690] Richard Carrier. "Did Jesus Exist? Earl Doherty and the Argument to Ahistoricity," accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/jesuspuzzle.html.

[691] Ehrman (NT, 4th ed.), p. 127.

[692] As but one example, the well-known different endings in Mark's Gospel may provide some clue as to theological concerns possibly trumping historical concerns.

[693] Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p. 233ff.

[694] Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), p. 260.

[695] Thomas L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 8. Thomson sees the Gospels as literature; they are not to be taken as literal fact.

[696] Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 10.

[697] Ibid., p. 12.

[698] John Dominic Crossan. PBS. "John Dominic Crossan: Evolution of the Four Gospels," accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/gospels.html.

[699] Ibid.

[700] Crossan (JARB), p. 26.

[701] Ibid., p. x.

[702] Harold Attridge. PBS. "Harold Attridge: Early Christians Interpreted Gospels Allegorically," accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/gospels.html.

[703] Paula Fredriksen. PBS. "Paula Fredriksen: Religious Advertisements," accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/gospels.html.

[704] Price (CMTP), p. 59.

[705] See Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, eds., *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), which also considers if the New Testament authors did this as well. See also David Stern, "Midrash and Parables in the New Testament," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 565-568 and James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[706] 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

[707] It also pays more respect to the Gospel authors who certainly would have known what many of the prophecies *originally* meant. In other words, they are not suddenly saying that the prophecies did not refer to earlier, but to current events; they referred to both. It is possible here, that the 'new', esoteric, interpretation of older prophecies was not simply grafted on to recent events concerning the Historical Jesus, but that they served as inspiration for the creation of the Gospel Jesus.

[708] Mark 1:1-3. From the New International Version, as with most of my biblical quotations.

[709] Price (CMTP), pp. 79, 80.

[710] Ibid., p. 239-241.

[711] Ibid., p. 59-260.

[712] Ibid., p. 62.

[713] Carrier (PH), pp. 199-204.

[714] Richard Carrier. "Ehrman on Jesus: A Failure of Facts and Logic," accessed 05/05/2012, http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/1026.

[715] Craig (RF), pp. 390-391.

[716] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 207-218. Also, on p. 224, Ehrman seems to bizarrely argue that Palestinian Jews of Jesus' time would have little knowledge of other gods, because Jews knew about them "hundreds of years earlier". Is he arguing for or against his position? It would be more convincing if he could prove that Jews only knew of these other gods hundreds of years *later*!

[717] Ibid., pp. 217, 218.

[718] Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 5, 21, 54.; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 69.; Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 40.

[719] More on this later. Much more.

[720] See Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*.

[721] Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.5.3.

[722] Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 3.38-40.

[723] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 208-210.; It is also noteworthy that Philostratus, a known author, claims to have gathered information on Apollonius from a number of sources, including: letters and treatises from the hand of Apollonius himself, a history of Apollonius written by Maximus of Aegae, and memoirs written by Damis and furnished by Julia Domna, the wife of Roman Emperor Septimius Severus. Philostratus even goes so far as to mention his scepticism over Moeragenes' four books about Apollonius. By comparison, the anonymous Gospel accounts of Jesus only offer Luke 1:1-4 where no specific (and non-supernatural) sources are cited, and where scepticism and criticism is generally found wanting. See Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.2-3.

[724] Peter Joseph, *Zeitgeist: The Movie* (Peter Joseph, 2007), Documentary film.

[725] Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History? Part 1," *Christianity Today*, March 15, 1974, pp. 4-7.; Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History? Part 2," *Christianity Today*, March 29, 1974, pp. 12-16.; Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus: A Journalist Investigates Current Attacks on the Identity of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), pp. 164-169.

[726] Petra Pakkanen, *Interpreting Early Hellenistic Religion: A Study Based on the Mystery Cult of Demeter and the Cult of Isis* (Helsinki: Suomen Ateenan-Instituutin Säätiö, 1996), pp. 2, 85, 100, 121, 136.

[727] For more on mystery religions, and the possibility that Christianity began as (or is like) one, and the covert apologetic agendas that sometimes dominate this sort of research, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[728] John G. Gager, "The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 263.

[729] And strangely enough, Jesus, Paul, and other authors note the secretive and mysterious nature of their teachings, throughout the New Testament. For some examples, see Matthew 7:6 and Romans 16:25-27.

[730] Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*.

[731] Richard Carrier, *Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu, 2009), pp. 32, 33, 86, 376. Note also that any attempt to argue that such references are not representative of all such believers in ancient times is irrelevant. Clearly, such ideas existed, even if it is only actualised once in the documents that have survived. It would also be fallacious to deny Christianity's influences due to an apparent lack of a religious 'blueprint' – Christianity would easily have adopted elements from many and separate Jewish and Pagan religions.

[732] John 19:14 cf. Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris* 42.

[733] Luke 24:7 cf. Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris* 39, 42.

[734] Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), pp. 55-81. On p. 217, Mettinger asserts that "the world of ancient Near Eastern religions actually knew a number of deities that may be properly described as dying and rising gods". On p. 221, Mettinger acknowledges that "dying and rising gods were closely related to the seasonal cycle"; an obvious link to astro-theology. On a less relevant note, some scholarship supports the view that Yahweh is somehow representative of the Sun. See J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) and John B. Whitley, "עיפה in Amos 4:13: New Evidence for the Yahwistic Incorporation of Ancient Near Eastern Solar Imagery," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (2015): 127-138.

[735] See the *Avesta*. An interesting passage concerning the Persian Messiah, or Saoshyant, is *Yasht* 19.88-96.

[736] For example, China's Yellow Emperor and other important rulers are considered to have been purely supernatural beings, which were later incorporated into Earthly history. See John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, eds., *Early Chinese Religion: Shang through Han (1250 BC-220 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 556.

[737] Interestingly, Carrier tries to avoid stressing pagan parallels, perhaps due to certain mythicists making too much of them. To secular scholars from the Studies in Religion discipline, however, parallels between various religions are exceedingly obvious and expected.

[738] Matthew 1:18 cf. Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), p. 391. McEvilley also notes that Clement of Alexandria indicated that the Greeks 'stole' their philosophy from the Indians. Given that Christianity and much of Second Temple Judaism was obviously influenced

by Greek culture, it would be unsurprising to find similarities between Christianity and the great Indian religious traditions. For more on the links between Buddhism and Christianity, see Elmar R. Gruber and Holger Kersten, *The Original Jesus: The Buddhist Sources of Christianity* (Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1995).

[739] Stephen Trzaskoma et al., eds., *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), p. 354.

[740] An obviously fictional tale even without supernatural embellishments. As if Herod would seek to kill an *insignificant* infant Historical Jesus, as well as a bunch of other innocent babies – and all this is without historical evidence. For interest, the story contains many other implausibilities and oddities, which certainly raises doubts for believers as to the Gospel of Matthew being infallible, such as Jesus' crew fleeing when Herod and others should have been satisfied that baby Jesus was already dead.

[741] Matthew 2 cf. *Bhagavata Purana* 10. The Massacre of the Innocents described in Matthew 2 also bears some similarities to the tenth Plague of Egypt. See Exodus 11-12. Let us also not overlook baby Moses' lucky escape in Exodus 1-2. The theme of killing innocent children to stave off a future threat, and the killing of Krishna's siblings, also echoes Cronus' devouring his children after being told that one of them – Zeus – would overthrow him. See Hesiod, *Theogeny*. More on Zeus soon.

[742] Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31 cf. Marcus J. Borg and Ray Riegert, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 1999), p. 13.

[743] Confucius, *Analects* 15.23. Jews seemed to know of the Golden Rule too. See Leviticus 19:18 and the tale of Hillel in the Talmudic *Shabbat* 31a. Bart Ehrman acknowledges that the Golden Rule is not exactly unique to Jesus. See Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 86.

[744] Mark 1:1-9 cf. Mark Csikszentmihalyi and P. J. Ivanhoe, *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 29. Consider also if questioning Laozi's historicity, in the West, would be as controversial as questioning Jesus' historicity.

[745] Matthew 5:43-47 cf. Laozi, *Daodejing* 49.

[746] Mark 6:4 cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, ed. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 138 and Alan Chan. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Laozi," accessed 09/02/2015, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/. Apparently, Laozi, atop his trusty ox, disgusted with the decline of his homeland, left to retire. The border guard, Yinxi, asked Laozi to jot down some of his wisdom, which resulted in the Daodejing. Such an appropriately humble and serendipitous origins tale for such an unassuming yet incredibly profound book! Laozi was never seen again, probably dying in some cave, though some believe he went to India and taught, or even was, the Buddha. Confucius was also said to be very much underappreciated in his own time, and the Old Testament has numerous instances of God's people failing to heed his prophets' warnings.

[747] Luke 4 cf. Borg and Riegert (JB), p. 101.

[748] *Vendidad* 19.

[749] John 2:1-11 cf. Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 3.66.3.

[750] Matthew 14:22-33 cf. Borg and Riegert (JB), p. 149.

[751] Mark 15:2 cf. Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008), pp. 267-271.

[752] John 20:1-10 cf. Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 4.38.4-5.

[753] Mark 15:33 cf. Augustine, *City of God* 3.15 and Price (ISSM), p. 335. Mainstream scholars are well aware of the many similarities between Jesus and the mythical Romulus. See Richard C. Miller, "Mark's Empty Tomb and Other Translation Fables in Classical Antiquity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 759-776.

[754] My 'taking over' comment merits some explanation. In the Greek myth, Zeus usurped Cronus. The Semitic Yahweh served as a replacement for 'his father', El, historically. For more on Yahweh's becoming the one true god of the Israelites, see Lataster (NJNG), pp. 167-168, as well as my upcoming doctoral thesis about God and the associated popular book. One particularly good source is Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2002).

[755] This works for mythicists and those generally accepting the Gospel account. Regarding the former, the angel known as Jesus was thought to be exalted by God for his good service, as in the Philippians hymn. For the latter, the carpenter's son saved the universe (with or without adopting adoptionism).

[756] Even *Rocky* had a montage…

[757] Note that Gospel Jesus himself compared his upcoming sojourn in the belly of the Earth to Jonah's time in the belly of the great fish. See Matthew 12:40 and Jonah 1:17.

[758] See Hesiod, *Theogeny*. The theme of children supplanting parents is common in ancient religion, and surely symbolises the complex relationships we have with those that indirectly grant us eternal life, whilst more directly acting as harbingers of our doom.

[759] Unlike Jesus? Hector Avalos might disagree with me there. See Avalos (BJ). Please note that Zeus is well known to have been a serial rapist, even going so far as to take the forms of animals, a woman, and what may have been an R Kelly-style spray of piss, to do the dirty deeds, and generally left his victims to be horribly punished by his jealous wife, Hera. Zeus' kinky sexual tastes were not confined to females either, as we see with his rape of Ganymede. Note that this apparently didn't make Zeus a homosexual, since the ancients tended to see 'tops/actives' as masculine, and 'bottoms/passives' as feminine.

[760] Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 1.13.; Again, Carrier tries to avoid going down this path. Interestingly, Carrier adapted Doherty's Celestial Jesus thesis, and Doherty does see it as very plausible that the Celestial Jesus myth has its origins in astro-theology, and speaks positively of fellow mythicist Acharya S, who delights in continually stressing Christianity's apparent astro-theological origins. See Doherty (JNGNM), p. 153.

[761] Otto Rank et al., *In Quest of the Hero: The Myth and Birth of the Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[762] Robert M. Price. "Christ a Fiction," accessed 10/07/2012, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/fiction.html.

[763] Robert Walter Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 35.

[764] Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 243, 252.

[765] R. Joseph Hoffmann and D. J. Grothe, *R. Joseph Hoffmann - The Jesus Project* (Amherst, NY: Center for Inquiry, 2007), Audio recording.

[766] Philip Davies. The Bible and Interpretation. "Did Jesus Exist?," accessed 11/09/2012, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/dav368029.shtml. In this piece, Davies also finds

that attacks on “amateur” claims are unprofessional and counter-productive, noting that, as has proved the case with Old Testament studies, minimalist “amateur” scholars could one day form the consensus view.

[767] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*.; Bennett (ISJ), pp. 172-174.

[768] Bart D. Ehrman. NPR. “‘Did Jesus Exist?’ A Historian Makes His Case,” accessed 10/04/2012, http://www.npr.org/2012/04/01/149462376/did-jesus-exist-a-historian-makes-his-case.

[769] Origen, *Commentary on John* 10.4. Also see Origen, *On First Principles*. That modern believers would barely consider Origen a Christian is beside the point. There existed numerous Jewish and Christian sects in antiquity.

[770] Jerome H. Neyrey, “Encomium versus Vituperation: Contrasting Portraits of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3 (2007): 529-552.

[771] Mark 1:1, Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20:31.

[772] Luke 1:1-4.

[773] This could imply that several people (we know of at least Mark and Matthew, who Luke seems to be influenced by) were fabricating gospels, and Luke wanted to get in on the action. Hardly the ringing endorsement that readers often take it to be.

[774] David P. Moessner, “‘Eyewitnesses,’ ‘Informed Contemporaries,’ and ‘Unknowing Inquirers’: Josephus’ Criteria for Authentic Historiography and the Meaning of παρακολουθέω,” *Novum Testamentum* 38, no. 2 (1996): 105-122.

[775] See Luke 1:5.

[776] Luke 22:45.

[777] With snippets handily preserved by our lovable rogue, Eusebius. It is no wonder that most critical scholars doubt ‘Papias’ on his claims about the Gospels’ authors.

[778] See MacDonald (TSG). Particularly interesting is how he argues that Luke’s prologue is a response to Papias’ comments about earlier Jesus traditions (pp. 44-45).

[779] In any case, MacDonald is not so optimistic about recovering the Historical Jesus from his version of ‘Q’. To him, this hypothetical Q+ source, probably originating between Paul’s letters and Mark’s Gospel, is basically a rewriting of Deuteronomy (from the Greek version of the Old Testament, making Q+ a fictional source transvalued from a translation of a fictional source), and he notes that it is difficult (I would say impossible) to extract genuine historical information from it (pp. 404, 505-512, 543-547). We can also – again – wonder why such an important document was not preserved. Given his common sense approach to seeing each source as building on the last, with some fictional additions thrown in for good measure, it is a little surprising that he posits this unverifiable Q+ source rather than just joining the growing group of mainstream scholars who see Mark as an allegorisation of Paul’s writings. More on this latter theory soon.

[780] Karl Ludwig Schmidt, *The Place of the Gospels in the General History of Literature*, trans. Byron R. McCane (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), p. 27

[781] Richard A. Burridge, “Jesus: His life, ministry, death, and its consequences,” in *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, ed. Dowley (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 31.

[782] Ibid., p. 34.

[783] For more on ‘non historical’ writing that appears ‘historical’, see Robert L. Fowler, ed. *Early Greek Mythography: Volume 1 - Text and Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).; Robert L. Fowler, ed. *Early Greek Mythography: Volume 2 - Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).; Alan Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[784] Burridge (WG), pp. 250-251.

[785] These are Isocrates’ *Evagoras*, Xenophon’s *Agesilaus*, Satyrus’ *Euripides*, Nepos’ *Atticus*, Philo’s *Moses*, Tacitus’ *Agricola*, Plutarch’s *Cato Minor*, Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars*, Lucian’s *Demonax*, and Philostratus’ *Apollonius of Tyrana*. See ibid., pp. 125-156.

[786] See chapter 26, ‘Books’, of Will Durant, *The Life of Greece* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

[787] Burridge (WG), p. 134.

[788] See ibid., p. 137. I compare this with a somewhat similar scenario where other evangelistic scholars I have dealt with try to ‘refute’ the notion that panentheism is a suitable alternative to classical theism by noting that various (all?) elements of the former can be found in various definitions of the latter, which is irrelevant, when we are interested in the god-concept as a whole, which can obviously still be unique. Of course some concepts will share elements! That doesn’t mean that dung beetles are the same species as humans on account of their having eyes…

[789] Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).; Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).; Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989). See also Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark’s Gospel* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), pp. 18 ff. Also helpful is Clarke W. Owens, *Son of Yahweh: The Gospels as Novels* (Alresford, UK: Christian Alternative Books, 2013).

[790] MacDonald (TSG), p. 541.

[791] Ehrman (NT), p. 54.

[792] Note also that Philo tended to interpret the scriptures allegorically. Consider also that Burridge’s examples of Greco-Roman biography omit *The Aesop Romance*, despite the assistance provided by its anonymous authorship. Perhaps including it would have made it too obvious that biographies can be written about ahistorical characters. Incidentally, much work has been done in comparing *The Aesop Romance* with the Gospels. For example, see David F. Watson, “The *Life of Aesop* and the Gospel of Mark: Two Ancient Approaches to Elite Values,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 699-716.

[793] See Polybius’ *Histories* 12.25a.1-2. Interestingly, another great Greek historian, Thucydides, felt that eyewitness accounts were of great importance, but noted that they could be unreliable, and further warns us about believing exaggerated accounts. See his *Peloponnesian Wars* 1.21-22. The Roman philosopher Cicero also considered it “history’s first law” that “an author must not dare to tell anything but the truth”. See *De Oratore* 2.15.62. It would seem, then, that it is not only modern historians that should cringe at what the Gospel authors had done, but ancient historians as well!

[794] Matthew 7:15-20.

[795] Licona (RJ), p. 34.

[796] Joseph H. Lynch, *Early Christianity: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 5-6.

[797] Michael E. Vines, *The Problem of Markan Genre: The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish Novel* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[798] See Michael D. Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 1743-1744.

[799] Anthropologist Emanuel Pfoh is yet another scholar who is sceptical about procuring genuine historical information from the Gospels. See Emanuel Pfoh, "Jesus and the Mythic Mind: An Epistemological Problem," in *'Is This Not the Carpenter?': The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus*, ed. Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 79-92.

[800] Richard Carrier. "Did Jesus Exist? Earl Doherty and the Argument to Ahistoricity," accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/jesuspuzzle.html.

[801] John Dominic Crossan. PBS. "John Dominic Crossan: Evolution of the Four Gospels," accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/gospels.html.

[802] See Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 184-198 and Werner H. Kelber, *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14-16* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976).

[803] For example, see Mark 1:10.

[804] Mark 1:1.

[805] Mark 11:12-25. Mark didn't find this embarrassing, probably because it's allegorical (some mainstream scholars think the fig tree represents the Temple and the Jews running it – indeed, Jesus' famous violent rampage at the Temple occurs in the very same passage). Matthew or a later editor of his gospel seemingly did, perhaps misunderstanding all this as history, removing the 'embarrassing' point about fig season. See Matthew 21:18-22. Consider also the possibility that Mark is, writing after the Temple's destruction, explaining that God allowed – or caused – this to happen as the Temple wasn't fulfilling its purpose. This is not the first time that stubborn/resilient Jews did such things, such as how local deity Yahweh was exalted as the entire world's God, to explain away the fact that Yahweh kept 'losing in his battles' (the Jews were constantly defeated and conquered) against Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, etc., gods. Mark, like many of the Old Testament authors, is explaining that God hasn't failed; his people have.

[806] It is often supposed that the later Gospels changed the baptism story out of embarrassment that Mark portrays Jesus somewhat subserviently. I wonder if Mark was not embarrassed because he knew this wasn't an actual historical event, and was merely an allegory, meant to encourage us to be humble, and meant to symbolise the emergence of a new covenant. Paul didn't bother to mention it at all…

[807] Matthew 1:18-25.

[808] Luke 24:1-53.

[809] Ehrman (MJ), p. 68.; Joe E. Barnhart and Linda Kraeger, *In Search of First-Century Christianity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 120.

[810] Mark 16:6-8.

[811] Apologists often claim that the testimony of Jewish women was not trusted. There is evidence against this notion. For example, see Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person?: The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 119-127.

[812] Mark 10:17-31.

[813] She/he truly seems to be an omniscient narrator, like an author of fiction. See Mark 16:8.

[814] Crossan (JARB), p. 26.

[815] Barnhart and Kraeger (ISFCC), pp. 76, 139.

[816] Price (CMTP), pp. 59-260.

[817] Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

[818] William Wrede and James C. G. Greig, *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971), pp. 237-241.

[819] Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1995), pp. 152-154.

[820] Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. xiv.

[821] As a Pharisee, Paul was already part of a movement to de-emphasise and move away from the need for the Temple, unlike the Sadducees.

[822] Helms (GF), pp. 13-14.

[823] Mark 16:6-8.

[824] Mark 14:58.

[825] Roger Norman Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 14. And perhaps this is similar to the evolution of, rather than the rejection of, Yahweh, by the stubborn/resilient Jewish people, when faced with pressures from surrounding empires. Rather than remaining as some local warrior god, Yahweh came to be seen as the God of all. See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Random House, 1999), pp. 24, 52-97 and Shawn W. Flynn, *YHWH Is King: The Development of Divine Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[826] Mark 13 makes this painfully obvious. This is also consistent with earlier instances of Jewish stubbornness/resilience. As alluded above, instead of acknowledging that their God does not exist, or was less powerful than the gods of foreign invaders, Jews evolved their religion. They fashioned an even greater, more transcendent, and universal, God for themselves. Likewise, certain Jews of the first century were in denial and either turned to the Celestial Jesus (a spiritual solution to a physical problem) or, in accordance with the more mainstream view, the Gospel Jesus (a spiritual solution to the physical problem of the Historical Jesus' unexpected death, which resulted in cognitive dissonance).

[827] For an interesting discussion of this topic, though it focuses on John's Gospel, see Paul M. Hoskins, *Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Temple in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007). On the likelihood that Mark's Gospel, the first gospel, was partly written with Jesus' spiritual solution to the Temple's destruction in mind, see Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 64-65.

[828] Cf. Sharon Faye Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), p. 36.

[829] Such Jewish problems, and solutions, are well known. For example, see Catherine A. Cory and Michael J. Hollerich, *The Christian Theological Tradition*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008) pp. 82-86.

[830] Recall how figures like Jesus ben Ananias already knew that it was all going to hit the fan.

[831] Also, I wonder if Jesus' constantly needing to reaffirm his disciples intentionally parallels the many times the Jews strayed from the faith.

[832] Samuel Angus, *Mystery Religions and Christianity* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), p. 45.

[833] From the poetic King James Version, for dramatic effect.

[834] See Aron Pinker, "The Core Story in the Prologue–Epilogue of the Book of Job," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6, no. 1 (2006):1-27.

[835] Tom Dykstra, *Mark, Canonizer of Paul: A New Look at Intertextuality in Mark's Gospel* (St Paul, MN: OCABS Press, 2012).

[836] Tom Dykstra. Tom Dykstra. "Did Jesus Exist?–Review of Bart Ehrman's New Book," accessed 18/06/2015, https://tomdykstra.wordpress.com/2012/11/30/did-jesus-exist-review-of-bart-ehrmans-new-book.

[837] See Thomas R. Hatina, ed. *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels: The Gospel of Mark* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 177. For another Christian scholar weighing in, see Paul Nadim Tarazi, *The New Testament Introduction: Paul and Mark* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999).

[838] Eve-Marie Becker, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, and Mogens Mueller, eds., *Mark and Paul: For and Against Pauline Influence on Mark* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

[839] Michael D. Goulder, "Those Outside (Mk. 4:10-12)," *Novum Testamentum* 33, no. 4 (1991): 295.

[840] Joel Marcus, "Mark – Interpreter of Paul," *New Testament Studies* 46, no. 4 (2000): 473-487.

[841] See David Oliver Smith, *Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul: The Influence of the Epistles on the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

[842] Levenson (DRBS), pp. 226-231.

[843] Ibid., p. 230. Sabin generally welcomes Levenson's approach. See Marie Noonan Sabin, *Reopening the Word: Reading Mark as Theology in the Context of Early Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 242

[844] The Septuagint is a Greek version of the Old Testament. Note that since Paul also uses the Old Testament texts to construct his view of Jesus, Mark employs them directly and indirectly.

[845] Bartosz Adamczewski, *The Gospel of Mark: A Hypertextual Commentary* (Frankfurt am Maim, Germany: Peter Lang, 2014).

[846] For some examples of Paul's allegorising of Old Testament pericopes, see Galatians 3-5.

[847] Interestingly, the failure to respect Paul's status as the earliest Christian author has also had an impact on some (particularly Torah-observant) Christians, who see Paul as a false prophet, or even Satan himself, largely due to his being beloved by (the supposedly heretical)

Marcion, and the differences between Paul's teachings and (Gospel) Yeshua's. Such thinking was not limited to more contemporary Christians, as the example of the early Ebionites attests.

[848] 1 Corinthians 10:1-6.

[849] See Dale Miller and Patricia Miller, *The Gospel of Mark as Midrash on Earlier Jewish and New Testament Literature* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) and Price (ISSM), pp. 169-172.

[850] Also consider how the name of Judas/Judah, the betrayer, is that of the traditional ancestor of the Jewish people – the very people that certain Christians (possibly including Mark) seem to see as having betrayed Jesus (and/or God).

[851] For example, the many implausibilities about Jesus being arrested, trialled, and executed, with the involvement of mainstream Jews during the Sabbath and/or a religious festival – one that happens to enhance the religious symbolism. See Mark 14-15. The notion that a Roman leader would ask a subjected people's opinion on who should be executed, particularly when it results in a known killer of Roman citizens being set free, namely Barabbas, rather than some mere 'loony' who thought himself to be the king of the Jews, is preposterous and without precedent (with regards to Roman and Jewish history, though it is easily linked to the Jewish scapegoating sacrifices occurring during Yom Kippur – in other words, this is almost certainly allegorical). See Mark 15:6-15. Cf. Robert L. Merritt, "Jesus Barabbas and the Paschal Pardon," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 1 (1985): 57-68. Consider also that Barabbas, meaning 'son of the father', may also allude to a punny choice by the author.

[852] Consider how the mocking of the pseudo-king Jesus in Mark 15:16-20 echoes the mocking of the pseudo-king Carabbas in Philo, *Flaccus* 6.36-39. And Carabbas sounds oddly familiar. Indeed, Barabbas features earlier in Mark 15, as somewhat of an 'alternative Jesus' and an alternative 'son of the father'.

[853] For example, the account of Jesus' respectful burial in Mark 15:42-47 seems historically implausible on account of the length of time it takes to die from crucifixion. The implausible passage seems somewhat meta or self-referential in noting Pilate's surprise at Jesus' quick death. Some also feel that crucifixion victims were typically shoddily treated. In any case, the passage just so happens to echo Isaiah 53:7-11. The reliance on the Old Testament is even more obvious when later Gospels copy Mark and elaborate further from the Old Testament texts. Thomas Thompson is one mainstream scholar who sees the Gospels' stories about Jesus as stemming from Old Testament and other ancient texts. See Thompson (MM).

[854] I am certainly not the only one to think that Mark could easily have created his own stories. Cf. Barry Henaut, *Oral Tradition and the Gospels: The Problem of Mark 4* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

[855] I wonder if the perception that Mark presents reliable history is yet another leftover from the early development of biblical scholarship, where Markan priority had not yet taken hold. In other words, Matthew was traditionally seen as the first Gospel, and seems more 'historical', which may have naturally led to Mark escaping harsher scrutiny. We know better now, and subject it to scrutiny we have. Just as we need to read Paul as Paul, let us read Mark as Mark, and see how the story of Jesus evolved over time. My reference to the Gospels authors' direct observations refers to the traditional authorship of the Gospels. The constant reliance on earlier writings effectively precludes the notion that these authors were eyewitnesses, such as the earliest followers of an Earthly Jesus.

[856] It is certainly not only mythicists/agnostics that see Mark in this light. Even secular historicists and Christian scholars arrive at this view. For example, see Robert M. Fowler, *Let the*

Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991).

[857] Jason Staples. "Goodacre on our ignorance of the "Historical Jesus"," accessed 18/06/2015, http://www.jasonstaples.com/bible/goodacre-on-our-ignorance-of-the-historical-jesus.

[858] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 117-118.

[859] A book that is scanty on historical facts and which seems to 'quote' Jesus by invoking the Old Testament.

[860] Karen L. King, "Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity: Representing Early Christian Differences for the 21st Century," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3-4 (2011): 216-237.

[861] Ehrman (LC).

[862] Ibid., p. 15.

[863] Einar Thomassen, "'Forgery' in the New Testament," in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. Lewis and Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 145-146.

[864] Ehrman (LC), p. 15.

[865] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.3.

[866] Ehrman (LC), pp. 42, 105.

[867] Romans 8:3-4.

[868] 1 John 4:1-3.

[869] Ehrman (LC), p. 178.

[870] Clement, *Stromata* 7.1.

[871] Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 17.

[872] Ehrman (OCS), pp. xii, 239.

[873] Galatians 4:4-7. It is surely not insignificant that not only mythicists and other scholars would perceive this, perhaps the 'strongest proof' that Paul believes in an earthly Jesus, as an obvious interpolation, but that such a prominent historicist thinks so as well. Note also that it does not bode well for the idea that Paul believes in an Earthly Jesus, if more and more of the few passages that might indicate this are exposed as later forgeries. Consider also that the name 'Mary' is nowhere mentioned, which supports a mythological interpretation, and that the 'woman' Jesus was made from is the same woman we were all made from, as Paul makes clear in the context – the corrupted world. If this sounds rather Gnostic, well… yes, yes it does. It is becoming increasingly plausible that Christianity's origins lie in mysterious/mystical/pantheistic/Gnostic traditions.

[874] It is this word in Galatians 4:4 that Ehrman demonstrated as being altered by later Christians. The same applies to Romans 1:3-4, which is also used to 'prove' that Paul's Jesus is an earthly human. See Ehrman (OCS), p. 239. Of further note is that these seem to be the only times that Paul apparently uses the word to refer to being 'born', throughout his epistles. It thus seems even more likely that Paul doesn't mean 'born' in these two passages concerning Jesus.

[875] See 1 Corinthians 15:20, 37, 45 and 2 Corinthians 5.

[876] Again, even this is somewhat of a misnomer, as the different Gospel authors do portray different Jesuses.

[877] This is especially true when Paul and similar writers never make it obvious, as we shall see.

[878] Read this paragraph again. Then read it again. When you've got it, read it one more time. Then turn it into a meme, and make it go viral.

[879] The fact that he doesn't claim that he was or was not an eyewitness seems quite suspicious, if such a Jesus actually existed.

[880] William Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3-4 (2011): 193-215. Compare this with my earlier theorising about Paul merely being an 'apocalypticist Jew'. On perceptions of Paul and his writings, John Gager calls on scholars to challenge long-held beliefs and venture into 'unknown territory'. See John G. Gager, "Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 60-73. This is what happens when we do…

[881] Romans 16:25-27.

[882] Galatians 1:11-12.

[883] Galatians 1:15-16.

[884] 1 Corinthians 11:23.

[885] 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Note how this possibly takes for granted that pre-Christian Jews expected a suffering Messiah.

[886] Galatians 1:11-21.

[887] Some of the so-called intertestamental and non-canonical texts are collectively called the Apocrypha, which, it has been argued, demonstrates how Jews continuously found ways to make the older scriptures relevant in contemporary times, and influenced the early development of Christianity. The same can be said for some of the Pseudepigrapha. See David A. DeSilva, *The Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012) and David A. DeSilva, *The Jewish Teachers of Jesus, James, and Jude: What Earliest Christianity Learned from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[888] I find it intellectually frustrating that historicists will take solace in ambiguous passages, and will conveniently overlook these unambiguous passages that work against them.

[889] Other naturalistic explanations could involve trances or magic mushrooms. It is worth noting that some think that the "thorn" in Paul's "flesh", which he calls "a messenger of Satan", is some sort of mental illness. See 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Of course, it is very popular for rational people today to think that seizures and mental illnesses underlie some ancient claims of demonic possession/attack.

[890] Galatians 1:18-19.

[891] Galatians 2:11.

[892] James Tabor. "Paul as Clairvoyant," accessed 21/09/2012, http://jamestabor.com/2012/05/23/paul-as-clairvoyant-2.

[893] 1 Corinthians 9:1, 15:1-8.

[894] Richard Carrier. "Ehrman on Jesus: A Failure of Facts and Logic," accessed 05/05/2012, http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/1026.

[895] Cf. Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p. 316 and Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New*

Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 61.

[896] 1 Corinthians 15:8 has Paul claiming "and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." Note that Paul's mentioning his being 'untimely/abnormally born/aborted' likely refers to him not being among the earliest to receive such revelations and/or the fact that he initially persecuted such people. It is also worth noting that the tales of Paul's conversion in Acts differ substantially from what Paul himself tells us. This is a common theme when comparing the Gospels and Acts with the Epistles.

[897] It may also be interesting to note that several scholars have thought of the important 1 Corinthians as being cobbled together by later Christians, from various fragments.

[898] Gerd Lüdemann, "Paul as a Witness to the Historical Jesus," in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth*, ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), p. 212.

[899] Margaret Barker, "The Secret Tradition," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 2, no. 1 (1995): 58.

[900] In other words, these hypothetical sources serve as an all too convenient *deus ex machina*.

[901] Note that even if Paul did refer to an Earthly and historical Jesus, which seems increasingly unlikely, it would not be decisive, as he, like the Gospels authors, is certainly not a trustworthy historian.

[902] Some may point to Romans 9:33 and its context as indicative that Paul at least thinks that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. But, once again, Paul is getting this ambiguous information straight from the Old Testament, not from recent history. Furthermore, Paul doesn't say "Jerusalem", but "Zion". The context shows that by 'Zion', Paul refers to Judaism as a religion, and not a geographical location. He is also talking about the gospel being laid there, not Jesus. This entire section is obviously theological, not biographical. It must certainly be embarrassing to historicists that the few apparently historical sounding mentions (they are all ambiguous at best) by Paul about Jesus have their origins not in recent historical sources, but in much older theological – and fictional – texts. Of course, while Paul is very transparent about getting his information from the older scriptures and his divine revelations, the same can be said for most (all?) of what the Gospels say about Jesus…

[903] Cf. Price (CMTP), p. 32.

[904] Ehrman (DJE), p. 140. Clearly, a Celestial Jesus, who didn't have an earthly life, and whose celestial death and resurrection was very important, serves as the perfect explanation, as we shall discuss.

[905] Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 389.

[906] For example, see Ehrman (DJE), p. 248.

[907] Such as Price (CMTP), pp. 354, 355.

[908] Ibid., p. 368.

[909] Much like Scorsese's Paul in his classic film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This Paul is portrayed as a 'noble liar', who is pretty uninterested in the truth.

[910] Ehrman (DJE), p. 248.

[911] Romans 14:1-4.

[912] 1 Corinthians 8.

[913] Colossians 2:20-21.

[914] Mark 7:14-15.

[915] See Romans 13:3-5 and 1 Peter 2:13-14. Interestingly, 'Peter' tells us, in the very same chapter, how Jesus suffered. Would he contradict himself in the very same chapter? Or is he indicating that Jesus did not suffer because of the authorities, but because of the sky-demons? More on this soon.

[916] 1 Corinthians 4:17.

[917] 1 Corinthians 11:1. Anyone pointing to Philippians 2 or some other similar Pauline passage would do well to consider that Paul is talking about a celestial character, not the Earthly Jesus of the Gospels. Again, Paul makes no unambiguous reference to Jesus' recent and earthly life.

[918] Romans 10:14-15.

[919] 1 Corinthians 1:22.

[920] Matthew 12:38-40.

[921] Matthew 6:5-13, Luke 11:1-4.

[922] Ehrman (DJE), p. 127.

[923] Gerd Lüdemann, "Paul as a Witness to the Historical Jesus," in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth*, ed. Hoffmann (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), pp. 211-212.

[924] Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 12-20.; Bruce D. Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 481-498.; Einar Thomassen, "'Forgery' in the New Testament," in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. Lewis and Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 143.

[925] Nikolaus Walter indicates that Paul knew nothing of any narrative traditions about Jesus, that the Gospel Jesus' sayings originated with Paul, and that the only teachings from Jesus at the time came from claimed revelations. See Nikolaus Walter, "Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition," in *Paul and Jesus: Collected Essays*, ed. Alexander J. M. Wedderburn (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), pp. 51-80. See also Jens Schröter, "The Early Jesus Traditions in the Context of the Origins of the New Testament Canon," in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, and John Miles Foley (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), pp. 104-122.

[926] See Mary R. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) and Janet Fairweather, "Fiction in the Biographies of Ancient Writers," *Ancient Society* 5, no. 1 (1974): 231-275. Crossan virtually argues that the Gospels are fictional, containing numerous parables that derived from the teachings of Jesus or even somebody else. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

[927] 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 14:34-35, 1 Timothy 2:11–14. This non-essential point can be overlooked, if all these passages are considered to be later forgeries. Ironically, if that were the case, we have even more reason to doubt the writings of 'Paul'.

[928] Please note that if all the following is wrong, it does not mean that there was a Historical Jesus. My comments thus far easily justify an agnostic position. This section is only

important in advancing the very real possibility that Jesus did not exist. Note also the possibility that Paul is advancing a 'middle position', developed from an earlier belief in a 'purely Celestial Jesus', on the way towards the belief in the 'Gospel Jesus'.

[929] Helms (GF), pp. 13,14.; Herman Nicolas Ridderbos and David H. Freeman, *Paul and Jesus: Origin and General Character of Paul's Preaching of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1957), p. 3.; James Tabor. "Paul as Clairvoyant," accessed 21/09/2012, http://jamestabor.com/2012/05/23/paul-as-clairvoyant-2.

[930] Mark 15.

[931] Hebrews 8:4.

[932] Philippians 2:5-11.

[933] At all, let alone recently. Unlike the Gospels, there is simply nothing in the Epistles that connects Jesus to a particular time and place on Earth.

[934] Genesis 32:22-32. Also, I wonder what this spiritual being's name was before it was Jesus. Maybe it was 'Michael' (the archangel, and sworn enemy of Satan/Lucifer), as some contemporary Christians believe. Some support for this idea comes from Daniel 12 and possibly Philo. Incidentally, 'Michael' means 'who is like God/El?'

[935] Note that even the prominent historicist Bart Ehrman finally admits that Paul's Jesus is an angel, as indicated by Galatians 4:14. See Ehrman (HJBG), p. 250.

[936] Christians might say that there was no chance that one of God's plans would fail. They would be welcome to read the Old Testament sometime. And to consider why Jesus' sacrifice was needed at all. Of course, to us atheists, God's plans do not factor in.

[937] Critics may point out that, since Jesus was a common Jewish name, it may be mere coincidence that a person thought to be the saviour sent by YHWH, would be named 'YHWH saves', in fiction-filled documents written by his followers. Of course, this confuses the possible with the probable. Pretty much everything is possible. We are trying to determine what is probably true.

[938] Ephesians 3:4-5.

[939] 1 Timothy 3:16. Emphasis mine. Note that 1 Timothy, like Ephesians, may not have been written by Paul, but by one of his followers, soon after his death.

[940] Hebrews 9:23-24, 10:1.

[941] Doherty (JNGNM), p. 91ff. Note that the belief in such otherworldly realms was certainly not limited to the Jews. See Mark Vassallo, "The Diagram of the Ophites: a Synthesis," *Australian Religion Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (1997): 16-27.

[942] Romans 3:21. Verse 26 also seems ambiguous regarding "the present time".

[943] Romans 16:25-27.

[944] Colossians 1:24-27.

[945] Colossians 2:2-3.

[946] 1 Peter 1:20.

[947] See Galatians 1 and 1 Corinthians 9:1.

[948] Galatians 1:6-9.

[949] Doherty (JNGNM), p. 87. I also suspect that 2 Corinthians 4:4 betrays Paul's Gnostic influences, as it portrays the 'god of this world' (i.e. the Demiurge, the evil god of the Old Testament?) as evil, while contrasting him with Christ, who represents the 'real' God. Note that

Gnosticism, while often portrayed as being a later development, was around before Christianity originated. It certainly isn't crazy to think that Christianity has Gnostic origins.

[950] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.7.2.

[951] I refer to the portion of the text known as the *Vision of Isaiah*, sans the 'pocket gospel' interpolation. For more on this text, such as its plausibly originating in the first century, and its importance for the study of early Christianity, see Robert G. Hall, "The *Ascension of Isaiah*: Community Situation, Date, and Place in Early Christianity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 2 (1990): 300-301. See also the more recent Jonathan Knight, "The Origin and Significance of the Angelomorphic Christology in the *Ascension of Isaiah*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 63, no. 1 (2012): 66-105. More on this intriguing document later. Also note that the Earthly counterpart to the Celestial Jesus' heavenly sacrifice would likely be the Jewish sacrifices of animals – just as the book of *Hebrews* indicates. I mention this to pre-empt any argument that says that if there was a Celestial Jesus that died up in the heavens, that entails an Earthly Jesus that died down here. That sort of exact, one-to-one, correlation is not claimed by mythicists. That would be like saying that some Jews would have believed that there was a Celestial Onan who spilled his heavenly seed throughout the upper realms. Or that there are Celestial Jews in Heaven, raping the nubile (or not!) daughters of the relatively innocent men and women that they slaughtered, in one of their many genocides. Or that there is a Celestial David lopping off the heavenly foreskins of Celestial Philistines. Unsurprisingly, no records have yet been found to support these ridiculous notions.

[952] Revelation 12:7-8. Note, however, that this is a relatively late Christian canonical text, and its meanings are highly disputed.

[953] Samuel Zinner, *The Gospel of Thomas: In the Light of Early Jewish, Christian and Islamic Esoteric Trajectories* (London: Matheson Trust, 2011), p. 291.

[954] Cf. Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ* (Ottawa: Canadian Humanist Publications, 1999), pp. 100-101.

[955] Samuel Brandon makes clear that Paul attributes the Crucifixion to demonic powers rather than to Pilate and the Jewish leaders, further indicating that Paul portrays the Crucifixion as a non-historical event. See Samuel George Frederick Brandon, *History, Time and Deity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), pp. 168-190. Ellingworth and Hatton claim that "A majority of scholars think that supernatural powers are intended here". See Paul Ellingworth and Howard Hatton, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1985), p. 46. See also Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 56 and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 233-236. Even Christian scholars are willing to admit this, and that the "scholarly literature for this position is immense". See Robert Ewusie Moses, *Practices of Power: Revisiting the Principalities and Powers in the Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 89. It is worth noting that important early Christians, like Origen and Marcion, also saw 'sky demons' here.

[956] To historicists' credit, they seem to avoid the easy but unreasonable objection that the passage says 'crucified' and not 'killed'. In other words, they could say that the passage indicates that the human authorities would have killed Jesus in a more respectful manner, had they known his purpose. This is a reasonable concept in itself, but we would here have to ignore all the other evidence.

[957] As a side note, I have always found it odd that Judas/Judah (recall the earlier notes about the possible pun and the Jewish blame game) is portrayed so negatively in the Gospels,

such as in Mark 14:10-11, when later people recognised and appreciated that his defining act of 'betrayal' was necessary. If that story was just an allegory, with the 'real story' being that Jesus was killed by ignorant demons, this little 'problem' is solved.

[958] Cf. Doherty (JNGNM), p. 105. Doherty further links this passage to Ephesians 3:9-10, which also seems to refer to ignorant spiritual powers, and Ephesians 6:12, wherein Paul explicitly states that their struggle is not against 'flesh and blood' but against evil spirits in the heavens.

[959] Note that, given the extensive references to the point, if historicists wish to label us 'fringe', they should not do so on account of our theorising about Jesus' being killed by sky-demons. This theme is to be found throughout this book. What may initially seem like odd little theories and interpretations actually are well entrenched in mainstream scholarship.

[960] I wonder if Paul's "as it is written" comment refers not only to the canonical Isaiah, but also to an earlier Jewish or Christian text, such as a hypothetical foundational source for the non-canonical *Ascension of Isaiah*, but I certainly don't want to – nor do I need to – rely on Ehrman's law! Strangely, with the encouragement of one of my Master's supervisors (who ironically intended to use the document to show how pointless it is to use the Epistles to argue for mythicism), I examined the *Ascension of Isaiah* very closely and found a passage that echoes Paul's quotation quite well: "Isaiah, son of Amoz… you have observed what no one born of flesh has observed". See *Ascension of Isaiah* 11:34.

[961] Romans 13:1-7.

[962] 1 Peter 2:13-14.

[963] Philippians 2:6-11. Recall how we saw earlier that assigning the name 'Jesus', meaning 'YHWH saves', *after* the Messiah successfully completed the mission makes a whole lot of sense. It would be a silly name indeed, had the poor fellow failed.

[964] It is as if baby Jesus was taunting the demons, "come at me bro!" And come they did. For example, Satan tempted Jesus in the desert. See Matthew 4:1-11.

[965] 1 Corinthians 11:5-10. If sky-demons and Earthlings (the sexy times were not limited to humans…) making the beast with two backs seems absurd to you, check out Genesis 6:1-4, 1 Enoch, Jubilees, Jasher, Jude, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and *On the Origin of the World*. Nothing should surprise us at this stage. Religious people often believe weird things, and Jews and Christians are no exception. In the interests of transparency, scholars are not in agreement about this erotic interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:5-10. Even so, Paul definitely believes in demons, which is my main point. For some asexual examples, see Romans 8:38-39, 1 Corinthians 10:20, Galatians 4:3, 8-9.

[966] 2 Corinthians 4:4, Ephesians 2:2. Recall that Ephesians may have been written by a follower of Paul, rather than Paul himself. Ironically, if that were the case, we would have even more support for such views. I.e. Paul clearly wasn't the only early Christian who believed in a celestial Jesus.

[967] On the mainstream historicist view, it was actually the Romans who defeated Jesus. I needn't mention what they did to the Jews.

[968] It is possible that the tradition that Jesus was killed and buried by people that did not know who he was, and what his mission was, was preserved somewhat in Acts 13:27-29.

[969] Given our earlier interest in puns, I speculate if the terms 'Joseph', which indicates that God will provide, and 'Arimathea', oft-taken to mean 'the heights', were employed to reinforce the idea that God sometimes uses high-ranking or powerful 'outsiders' to provide for

his people. Cf. 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, which has God using the Pagan leader Cyrus to aid the Israelites.

[970] This might seem a little strange. With his prominent role in Jesus' burial, Joseph would certainly have been one of the first questioned about a certain missing body. Of course, plot holes abound in works of fiction…

[971] There are several reasons why some scholars doubt his existence, such as Joseph being a prominent member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, while Mark 14:55-64 has ALL of the Sanhedrin members keen to condemn Jesus to death. For some discussion of arguments for and against, see William John Lyons, "On the Life and Death of Joseph of Arimathea," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 2, no. 1 (2004): 29-53.

[972] See James 5:7-8, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10. The latter reference mentions that Jesus will eventually be revealed, as if he hadn't been before…

[973] 2 Corinthians 6:2.

[974] This can cause some confusion, as spiritual bodies are bodies too (as made clear in 1 Corinthians 15), and may have 'flesh' of a sort. Yes, the 'spiritual' can be 'physical' too, just of a different sort to 'our type' of physical.

[975] 1 Corinthians 5:9, Colossians 4:16. Note also the missing letters *to* Paul.

[976] Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. xvi.

[977] James Tabor. "Paul as Clairvoyant," accessed 21/09/2012, http://jamestabor.com/2012/05/23/paul-as-clairvoyant-2.

[978] Iain Gardner and Samuel N. C. Lieu, eds., *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 4-5.

[979] The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas has a 'living Jesus' (compatible with the Celestial Jesus view) transmitting messages to Thomas, which means 'twin'. Many early Christians did see Thomas as Jesus' twin. Widely acknowledged as a sayings gospel, perhaps the more 'historical sounding' portions are allegories, with this gospel serving as an intermediary between Paul's writings and the allegorised Gospel of Mark. Depending on this document's age and intent, this Thomas could possibly be a Pauline-type Christian, receiving revelations from the Celestial Jesus, who happens to be his 'brother' (as with James, or so historicists think), and even his 'heavenly twin' (as with Mani).

[980] 2 Peter is widely recognised as a forgery and seems like it could be specifically addressing Christians that saw the Gospel story as allegorical and that denied Jesus' Earthly career. See 2 Peter 1:16 and 2:1. The author goes on to make up (eyewitness) stories about the apparently Earthly Jesus. Sort of like what Bart Ehrman does. They just make up the evidence they don't have.

[981] We can also consider the possibility – as some scholars already do – that the letters of Paul, James, and the like, were not merely 'occasional letters', and were instead carefully constructed and framed as such. This would make the dearth of information on the Historical Jesus even more surprising, unexpected, and improbable. Supportive of this is that Paul's journey depicted in the first few chapters of Galatians just happens to echo Elijah's in 1 Kings 18-19. For an example of such work, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). For a more general account of how ancient letters may have been carefully (and perhaps fraudulently) constructed, with (feigned) indications of emotion or passion and seemingly tangential details purposely thrown in to make it appear more

genuinely ‘occasional’, see Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[982] Jude 1.

[983] For example, see Acts 12:17, 15:13-21, 21:17-18. This lack of mention is also interesting given that the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (which post-date Paul’s writings but predate Luke’s gospel) mention that Jesus had a brother named James.

[984] Matt Jackson-McCabe, “The Messiah Jesus in the Mythic World of James,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (2003): 701-730.

[985] For example, see Helms (GF), pp. 13-14.

[986] Philo, *On Dreams, That They are God-Sent* 1.215 cf. John 1:1 and the book of Hebrews.

[987] Philo, *On Dreams, That They are God-Sent* 1.215 cf. Romans 8:29.

[988] Philo, *The Special Laws, I*, 81, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 62-63 cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4.

[989] Philo, *The Special Laws, I*, 81 cf. 1 Corinthians 8:6.

[990] Philo, *On Dreams, That They are God-Sent* 1.215 cf. Colossians 1:18, Hebrews 4:14.

[991] Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 146 cf. Galatians 3:27, 1Corinthians 11:1.

[992] Philo, *Who is the Heir of Divine Things?* 42.205-206, *On the Life of Moses, II*, 134 cf. Colossians 1:13-14.

[993] Perhaps Philo’s *Logos* was explicitly named in one of his many lost passages/books. That Christians were the ones who preserved Philo’s works makes this a little more plausible.

[994] Cf. Arthur J. Droge, “Jesus and Ned Ludd: What’s in a Name?,” *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values* 3, no. 1 (2009): 23-25.

[995] It is relevant that Philo, an Alexandrian Jew, almost certainly used the Septuagint extensively. Paul and the Gospel authors also seem to prefer the Septuagint to the (not yet existing) Hebrew Masoretic Text, on occasion. To clarify, earlier Hebrew versions of the Old Testament texts would certainly have existed, but the major Hebrew version used today, the Masoretic Text, curiously stems from many centuries after the rise of Christianity. Just as curiously, there are some important differences with the *much older* Septuagint. Yet more evidence that the Jewish religion/s had evolved.

[996] It is very sad that some scholars don’t seem to realise this.

[997] Carrier (NIF), p. 250.

[998] Apparently, John the Baptist’s father (intriguingly, also named Zechariah) seemed to think that this passage alluded to Jesus. See Luke 1:78-79. Cf. Simon Gathercole, “The Heavenly ἀνατολή (Luke 1:78–9),” *Journal of Theological Studies* 56, no. 2 (2005): 471-488. Gathercole, a Christian, also seems to acknowledge that Philo does see this figure as God’s firstborn, and as the *Logos*.

[999] Zechariah 3:8. The context also seems to allude to various elements of the Jesus story, such as Satan’s involvement.

[1000] Carrier (NIF), p. 251. Cf. Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 62-63.

[1001] Ibid., p. 251. Cf. Zechariah 6:13.

[1002] Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 61. Note also that this multi-layered view of the world continued beyond, with the later Muslims also perceiving the world in this way. See Quran

65:12. We certainly should not imagine that all these believers, from the ancient Greeks (and before) to the Muslims (and beyond), would think these multiple realms to be completely devoid of objects and persons.

[1003] This fascinating – and probably mostly irrelevant – footnote alludes to my other research, which may be featured in my next book, and can be overlooked. Much Gnostic thought revolves around the god of the Old Testament, Yahweh, the creator of our world, being evil, whilst Jesus is a representative of the 'true God'. I suspect that the Christian Gnostics did not spin-off from a 'purer' (i.e. traditional) form of Christianity as mainstream scholars prefer, but that it lies at the origins of Christianity, and was influenced by Jewish Gnostics, who may well have been the remnants of the earlier polytheistic Jews that much of the writings and edits of the Old Testament texts seek to minimalise and refute. I also wonder if these polytheistic/Gnostic Jews, resentful (perhaps this is where Lucifer/Satan as Yahweh seeking to overthrow El enters the fray – cf. the angelic Jesus who was not so tempted, or overcame such temptations, as in Philippians 2:6-11 and Hebrews 4:15) and fearful over the monotheistic developments, did not then make their beliefs more secretive and elitist, yielding Gnostic/Jewish mystery religions. This parallels the common mythicist thoughts about how 'alternative' Christians – who may have been the 'original' Christians – may have needed to retreat somewhat, enshrouding their core beliefs in allegories, while the fanatical proto-orthodox would flourish, and further misinterpret these allegories. I am not alone in thinking along such lines. In my other work I often discuss the virtual certainty that the Judeo-Christian god Yahweh was initially subservient to his high god father El. Barker links this idea with the idea of an angelic Jesus that could well have been in the minds of certain Jews *before* the rise of Christianity. This sort of research certainly must lend some support to a sort of Gnostic origin for the faith, featuring a purely angelic Jesus. See Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). Interestingly, Baal was a dying-and-rising god, so perhaps ideas about Jesus' death and resurrection were not new (for Jews), but stemmed from a prevailing belief that Yahweh, too, as an analogue to Baal, was a dying-and-rising god. In short, we really need to rethink Christian origins, and probably should pay more respect to 'alternative' early Christianities.

[1004] Barnhart and Kraeger (ISFCC), p. 144.

[1005] L. Michael White, "Logos and Wisdom's Child," in *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

[1006] He also seems to warn against the common assumptions about early Christianity, and is adamant that "the Gnostics were lively participants in an ongoing process of inventing and reinventing Christianity". See David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 84-89. There clearly is much more to the story of Christian origins than the traditional Christian view. And of course, the mainstream secular view is only nominally different to the traditional Christian view, whereby much of the tradition is accepted, with (generally) only miraculous and supernatural elements perceived as 'slightly exaggerated'.

[1007] Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*.

[1008] Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Philo of Alexandria: A Thinker in the Jewish Diaspora*, trans. Robyn Fréchet (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 215-218ff.

[1009] Recall Ehrman's effective admission that some pre-Christian Jews had already believed in a Celestial Christ.

[1010] Religious Studies scholar Stevan Davies also considers a Jewish and 'pre-Christian Christianity', made evident in the possibly pre-Christian *Odes of Solomon*, in Stevan Davies, *Spirit Possession and the Origins of Christianity* (Dublin: Bardic Press, 2014).

[1011] 1 Corinthians 15:5.

[1012] Ehrman (DJE), p. 151.

[1013] Galatians 1:18-19.

[1014] The crucial phrase could be an interpolation, similar to the Josephean interpolation/s. Indeed, Ehrman has elsewhere argued for restraint – as we all should – with regards to accepting everything in Galatians, seeing as the earliest manuscript we have comes from around 150 years after it was written, and was likely subject to many edits.

[1015] Here is another unnecessarily indulgent footnote that can easily be overlooked. One theory says that James was made Jesus' actual brother, so as to co-opt the Jamesians, just as John the Baptist was made Jesus' cousin to incorporate the Baptists into the fold. This is common with newly developing religions, such as how a previous culture's gods may be appropriated and 'relegated' (to angels, for example). The Romans did it, as did the Greeks. For example, the important "mother of the Cretan god of the tree-cult became" a mere "tree-nymph", and one of Zeus' many sexual conquests. See B. Al, "Cretan Religion in Relation to Greek Religion," *Mnemosyne* 12, no. 3 (1944): 220-221. Sticking with the Greeks and the Minoans of Crete, I wonder about the significance of the respected Minoan bull being related to the feared and hated Minotaur. Also, recalling our earlier discussion about Zeus' exaltation, it is fascinating to see how the infant Zeus of a matriarchal religion became elevated to that of a masculine culture's sky-father. Cf. Martin Persson Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, 2nd ed. (Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1950), pp. 533-541. The Jews also did their fair share of adopting and relegating the important figures of other religions, as we can see with the likes of El, Baal, and Yahweh. Even later Christians did this, with Buddha becoming Saint Josaphat, and Catholics in general incorporating Pagan elements into the faith so as to attract more adherents. That earlier Christians also took ecumenical action is evidenced throughout the New Testament, with various strands of 'Christianity' represented. David Trobisch thinks that Polycarp heavily edited and published the New Testament as we know it, partly in order to co-opt the hated Marcionites. See David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and David Trobisch, "Who Published the New Testament?," *Free Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2007/2008): 30-33. Muslims may have done this too, such as with their interpretation of Jesus, and the example of the three 'daughters of Allah' in the infamous 'Satanic verses' found in the Quran.

[1016] Romans 8:29.

[1017] 1 Corinthians 4:15.

[1018] Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.47.

[1019] R. Joseph Hoffmann. "The Jesus Tomb Debacle: RIP," accessed 26/08/2012, http://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com/2009/05/15/the-jesus-tomb-debacle-rip/. He claims that many scholars agree with him. One may be Stephanie Fisher, who seemed to endorse this sceptical piece, calling it "wise", and declaring that Hoffman's "conclusions are based on evidence and argument", in contrast with other scholars' spurious claims regarding Jesus' brothers. See Neil Godfrey. "Only scholars can "know" Jesus existed," accessed 08/10/2015, http://vridar.org/2012/08/03/only-scholars-can-know-jesus-existed/.

[1020] See Ehrman (OCS), pp. 238-239.

[1021] Follow along by reading Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.2-3.

[1022] Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.4.

[1023] Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 20.

[1024] This raises the question as to why an interpolation would be ambiguous. Perhaps this is an oversight (as with 'accidental interpolations'), or a result of trying to make the insertion fairly unobtrusive, or this is to otherwise make it less obvious that it is an interpolation. As made clear by previous references, many ancient authors were specifically trained to frame their writings in certain ways.

[1025] See Arthur Denner Howell Smith, *Jesus Not a Myth* (London: Watts & Co., 1942), pp. 76-78.; Frank R. McGuire, "Did Paul write Galatians?," *Hibbert Journal* 66, no. 1 (1967-1968): 52-57.; John Cochrane O'Neill, *The Recovery of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (London: S.P.C.K., 1972).; G. D. Kilpatrick, "Peter, Jerusalem and Galatians 1:13-2:14," *Novum Testamentum* 25, no. 4 (1983): 318-326.; Hermann Detering. "The Original Version of the Epistle to the Galatians - Explanations," accessed 08/10/2015, http://www.radikalkritik.de/DetGalExpl.pdf.; Smith (MMLP), pp. 69-72. Also note that in 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul himself indicates that there are several 'brothers of the Lord', and mentions them as a group, right after 'the other apostles'.

[1026] In a similar vein, if Paul does believe in the Celestial Jesus, there is the possibility that James was literally seen as the literal brother of that Celestial Jesus. There are stranger things in the scriptures; like how it is apparently necessary for an all-powerful God to use blood magic. While I find this to be *extremely unlikely*, especially given Paul's relationships with the other apostles, recall that Mani supposedly had a celestial twin in the heavens.

[1027] 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

[1028] 1 Corinthians 10:20-21.

[1029] Mark 14:12-26, Matthew 26:17-30, Luke 22:7-39, and John 13:1-17:26.

[1030] Valantasis (GT), pp. 12-20.; Bruce D. Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 481-498.

[1031] Borg and Riegert (JB).

[1032] Which we shall discuss in more detail later. As noted earlier, Ehrman already admits that some pre-Christian Jews already believed in a Celestial Messiah.

[1033] For example, 2 Timothy 3:8 refers to enemies of Moses, Jannes and Jambres, who are never named in the rest of the Bible, but are referred to in apocryphal writings. Similarly, Jude and 2 Peter seem to make several references to the non-canonical book of 1 Enoch. Also keep in mind that the decisions to make distinctions between what is canon and what is not were made by flawed men, not an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful god.

[1034] Willis Barnstone, ed. *The Other Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. xix.

[1035] John Joseph Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 186. The latter and most controversial claim derives from the Wisdom of Solomon, and, arguably, Isaiah. Collins' book is quite good at supporting the plausibility of any theory that entails Jewish belief in celestial/heavenly realms/figures, discussing such things as the 'heavenly dimension', 'the heavenly world', 'heavenly journeys', 'heavenly books', 'heavenly doubles', 'heavenly tablets', 'heavenly armies', a 'heavenly court', a 'heavenly temple', a 'heavenly savior', and the 'revelation of heavenly mysteries'. Several scholars, such as John Collins and Florentino García Martínez see a messianic and heavenly Son of Man (i.e. a pre-Christian celestial Christ) in *4Q246*, which is one of the Jewish and pre-Christian Dead Sea Scrolls (also important are 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra). See Årstein Justnes, *The Time of Salvation: An Analysis of 4QApocryphon of Daniel ar (4Q246), 4QMessianic Apocalypse (4Q521 2), and 4QTime of Righteousness (4Q215a)*

(Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), pp 50-51. Such scholars tend to also equate Jesus with the archangel Michael, as some Christians (i.e. Jehovah's Witnesses) do today.

[1036] Daniel 7:13-14.

[1037] Ezekiel 1:26.

[1038] 1 Corinthians 15:45-49. Note that the later Gospels also associate Jesus with the 'Son of Man' moniker.

[1039] Cf. Levenson (DRBS), pp. 200-219. On p. 218, Levenson says, "Much early christology is thus best understood as a midrashic recombination of biblical verses associated with Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham, with the suffering servant in Isaiah who went, Isaac-like, unprotesting to his slaughter, and with another miraculous son, the son of David, the future messianic king whom the people Israel (*sic*) awaited to restore the nation and establish justice and peace throughout the world."

[1040] Recall that the sayings of Q, if that document existed, could have originated with anyone. There are academics who are willing to divert from the traditional view of Q, such as Religious Studies scholar Sarah E. Rollens, who considers that "Q is not necessarily *about* Christianity and we are not always obliged to discuss it as such – although it certainly contains ideas that later became central to it. Just as Q is placed alongside the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in courses on Christian origins, so also it should be placed alongside texts such as *Ben Sira* and *1 Enoch* in courses on Second Temple Judaism." See William Arnal, Willi Braun, and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2012), pp. 188-189.

[1041] John 1:1.

[1042] Crossan (JARB).; Funk (HJ).; Meier (MJ1).; Albert Schweitzer and William B. D. Montgomery, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1910).

[1043] Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*.

[1044] Philo, *On Abraham* 41, *On Dreams* 1.58.

[1045] Galatians 4:22-31.

[1046] 2 Corinthians 3.

[1047] From Mark 4:11-12.

[1048] Matthew 13:52.

[1049] For example, see Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah* 18.4.2.

[1050] John 21:25.

[1051] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 162-163.

[1052] See Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 8:6.

[1053] See Ehrman (HJBG).

[1054] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 222, 231-241.

[1055] Ibid., p. 234.

[1056] Ibid., p. 238.

[1057] Any Christians today that do believe that the Celestial Jesus exists would constitute a fourth faction. While I would applaud such a group's existence as recognising 'the true origins' of their faith, I certainly would not become a convert. See the following note.

[1058] Interestingly, on the Gospel Jesus view, Jesus would still be ‘around’, so that we are no longer constrained by the limitations of such historical research. The same could be said of the Celestial Jesus. Since we don’t have any evidence of either Jesus currently interacting with our world, and since we believe that the Celestial Jesus didn’t/doesn’t exist, this ‘negative evidence’ also favours the Celestial Jesus theory (and not the Celestial Jesus’ actual existence).

[1059] 1 Enoch 70-71.

[1060] See Darrell L. Bock and James H. Charlesworth, eds., *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[1061] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 241-246.

[1062] Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 2-5.

[1063] See Ehrman (DJE), p. 246.

[1064] Indeed, more so than for many other/earlier religions, Christianity had/has a very strong focus on orthodoxy, on people having ‘correct beliefs’. I think that this perspective makes it relatively more likely that later scribes would happily change the texts to stress what they believe to be the ‘correct beliefs’.

[1065] I am here alluding to the privileges enjoyed by the Abrahamic faiths in mainstream, Western academia. Somehow, we prefer to acknowledge that there is some modicum of truth therein, while ‘pagan’ religions are apparently just batshit crazy. Of course, as a religiously tolerant and open-minded objective scholar of religion, I find such presuppositionalist and Western-centric attitudes to be deeply offensive and otherwise illogical.

[1066] M. Gabriela Garcia-Teruel, “The Untold? True? Story that Inspired the Legend,” in *Avalon Revisited: Reworkings of the Arthurian Myth*, ed. María José Álvarez Faedo (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 218.

[1067] Arthur J. Droge, “Jesus and Ned Ludd: What’s in a Name?,” *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values* 3, no. 1 (2009): 23-25.

[1068] Hitchens (GNG), p. 280.

[1069] Arthur J. Droge, “Jesus and Ned Ludd: What’s in a Name?,” *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values* 3, no. 1 (2009): 23-25.

[1070] Sandy Hobbs and David Cornwell, “Sawney Bean, the Scottish Cannibal,” *Folklore* 108(1997): 49-54.

[1071] Arthur J. Droge, “Jesus and Ned Ludd: What’s in a Name?,” *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values* 3, no. 1 (2009): 23-25.

[1072] Avalos (EBS), p. 314.

[1073] Gager and Flusser speculate on the scant presence of Jesus’ personal message in the New Testament, and also point to the importance of *the teachings*, which have “the potential to change our world”. See John G. Gager, “Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 66.

[1074] Here is a handy way to summarise all this and especially to demonstrate to others why the hypothetical sources are so necessary in this area of research: The extra-biblical sources concerning Jesus are scant, late, derivative, and fraudulent and/or ambiguous. Hence, the discussion is effectively limited to the texts of the New Testament, primarily the Epistles and the Gospels. The earlier Epistles, especially those of Paul, make no unambiguous mention of a Historical Jesus that was recently on Earth. Nothing is said of his earthly teachings and miracles.

Some of these writings even indicate that Jesus was killed in some heavenly realm. The Epistles discuss a Celestial Messiah, eerily reminiscent of the Celestial Messiah that apocalypticist (and possibly other) Jews, before and around the time of nascent Christianity, already believed in. The sources of the Epistles' authors are very suspect, with appeals made to supernatural revelations, and reinterpretations of older Jewish texts. In other words, the little these authors may know about a Historical Jesus comes not from historical sources, but from supernatural experiences and interpretations. The case for the Historical Jesus then must rest on the Gospels, which were written later. Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John, effectively build on the Gospel of Mark. Curiously, scholars are increasingly supposing that Mark is essentially allegorising Paul's teachings, and life, which obviously raises major questions. This issue aside, the Gospels are notoriously unreliable, prompting vocal historicists like Bart Ehrman to appeal to hypothetical foundational sources, which 'must' be historically accurate. Without them, it appears that the case for the Historical Jesus is virtually non-existent, like, possibly, himself.

[1075] As a scholar and an honest seeker after truth, I have little time for those who desire proof of the non-existence of God/the Biblical Jesus/the Historical Jesus on account of their anti-religious (and specifically anti-Christian) motives. However, such people should actually be quite pleased with agnostic conclusions concerning the so-called Historical Jesus. Miraculous claims are already wildly implausible, so that the Christ of Faith almost certainly did not exist. Surely the existence of this figure can be considered more doubtful if we cannot even be sure that there was some mundane Jesus behind the myths. As much as I wish to view this debate as being purely historical, the conclusions certainly have some polemical and even probabilistic impact when focus is turned to the Christ of Faith. More on this in my upcoming book on God's (non)existence.

[1076] From Matthew 3:11. Please note that the number of footnotes in the chapter focussing on my work, and the number of this footnote concerning a certain prophecy (666), was actually not by design. Well, not by me…

[1077] For example, see Richard Carrier. "List of Responses to Defenders of the Historicity of Jesus," accessed 04/10/2015, http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/5730.

[1078] Carrier, who is recently divorced, blogs fairly often about his alcohol intake and his sexual fetishes. For but a few examples, see Richard Carrier. "My Favorite Scotch," accessed 23/07/2015, http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/4192. Also see Richard Carrier. "Coming Out Poly + A Change of Life Venue," accessed 23/07/2015, http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/6737.

[1079] I have the impression that he initially perceived me as a rival for book sales, rather than a colleague, supporter, or ally.

[1080] Carrier (OHJ), p. xi.

[1081] Ibid., p. xii.

[1082] Ibid., p. 3.

[1083] Ibid., pp. 4-7.

[1084] Ibid., p. 8.

[1085] Ibid., pp. 8-10.

[1086] Ibid., pp. 11-13.

[1087] Ibid., p. 13.

[1088] Ibid., p. 16.

[1089] Ibid., p. 18.

[1090] Ibid., pp. 21-24.

[1091] Ibid., p. 21.

[1092] Ibid., p. 24.

[1093] Ibid., p. 26.

[1094] Ibid., p. 26.

[1095] Ibid., p. 27.

[1096] Ibid., p. 28.

[1097] Ibid., p. 29.

[1098] Ibid., p. 30.

[1099] Ibid., p. 30.

[1100] Ibid., p. 31.

[1101] Ibid., p. 32.

[1102] Ibid., p. 34.

[1103] Ibid., p. 39. Carrier also omits two other phrases deemed to be likely interpolations, though they cause no real problems to the theory that Jesus did not exist. See p. 42. Note also that while we both agree that the 'pocket gospel' is most probably not genuine, I have earlier speculated about some possible ambiguities therein. Since the description of Jesus' descent through the various realms does not actually specify that Jesus stopped over at Earth, I have wondered if his alleged birth, and so forth, is taking place in heavenly counterparts to Bethlehem, Jerusalem, etc. If this sounds far-fetched, note that Paul casually speaks of a heavenly Jerusalem in Galatians 4:26. Are we to assume that Paul's heavenly beings are doing nothing in Paul's heavenly locations? That ridiculous assumption must clearly be dropped by scholars looking into Christian origins, and doing so would make minimal mythicism seem far more plausible. Nevertheless, partly due to the appearance of Pilate, I agree with Carrier that this is a likely forgery that intended to drastically alter the meaning of the work.

[1104] Ibid., p. 40.

[1105] Ibid., p. 41.

[1106] Ibid., p. 45.

[1107] No offence is intended here; Doherty is technically an amateur. While I mention this in the interests of transparency, it may still be a little harsh, given that Doherty does hold a BA in Classics. Any historicists that stress Doherty's status as an 'amateur' commit the genetic fallacy, and ignore his own scholarly influences. Again, let's stick to the arguments.

[1108] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 45-46.

[1109] Ibid., pp. 46-47.

[1110] Ibid., p. 47.

[1111] Ibid., p. 48.

[1112] Ibid., pp. 52-53.

[1113] Ibid., p. 53. Please note that premise 2 means that this is what people apparently believed, not that this Celestial Jesus actually existed.

[1114] Ibid., pp. 53-54.

[1115] Ibid., pp. 56-58.

[1116] Ibid., p. 58.

[1117] Ibid., pp. 60-64.

[1118] Ibid., pp. 65-66.

[1119] Ibid., p. 66.

[1120] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

[1121] Ibid., pp. 67-73. Carrier notes that a messianic cult based on a spiritual – i.e. non-existent – messiah (Christianity?) may have had greater chances of success, as there would be less of a militaristic threat to Rome.

[1122] Ibid., pp. 73-81.

[1123] I would add that there is much in Paul that echoes the contents of (just as with Philo's writings) the Wisdom of Solomon.

[1124] A pesher. I.e. The author reinterprets the Old Testament, making it relevant in the present. This may be what Paul, Mark, and the other Gospel writers did.

[1125] The intertestamental period lasted for around four centuries, and roughly corresponds to the Second Temple period, wherein various Jewish sects developed.

[1126] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 81-83.

[1127] Ibid., pp. 83-87.

[1128] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

[1129] Ibid., pp. 88-92.

[1130] Ibid., pp. 92-96.

[1131] Ibid., pp. 96-108.

[1132] Ibid., p. 108.

[1133] Ibid., pp. 108-114.

[1134] Matthew 7:6.

[1135] Mark 4:11-12.

[1136] From the perspective of the mainstream historicists who hold traditional and monolithic views concerning the Gospels and the Epistles, we might ask: "Don't these Biblical authors realise how many problems would have been solved (and potentially lives saved) if they had just been more forthright?" In other words, this secrecy is unexpected, and is thus improbable, on the mainstream historicity hypothesis.

[1137] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 114-124.

[1138] Ibid., pp. 124-137.

[1139] Ibid., pp. 137-141.

[1140] Ibid., pp. 141-143.

[1141] Ibid., pp. 143-145.

[1142] Ibid., p. 146.

[1143] Ibid., p. 146.

[1144] Ibid., pp. 146-148.

[1145] Ibid., pp. 148-152.

[1146] Ibid., pp. 153-154.

[1147] Ibid., pp. 154-155.

[1148] Ibid., p. 155.

[1149] Ibid., pp. 155-156.

[1150] Ibid., p. 156.

[1151] Ibid., pp. 156-159.

[1152] Ibid., pp. 159-163.

[1153] Many academic references are provided, generally from Religious Studies scholars, including my beloved colleague (and Christian), Emeritus Professor Garry Trompf. This all highlights the value that 'outsiders' to specialist New Testament research can bring to the topic.

[1154] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 164-168.

[1155] Ibid., pp. 168-173.

[1156] Ibid., pp. 173-175.

[1157] Ibid., pp. 175-177.

[1158] Ibid., pp. 178-180.

[1159] 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.

[1160] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 180-181.

[1161] Ibid., pp. 181-183.

[1162] Ibid., pp. 184-193.

[1163] See Romans 13:4, Peter 2:13-14.

[1164] Ephesians 2:1-2. Note that Satan lives in the sky. That Satan rules a subterranean realm is a later development, and echoes Greek myths concerning Hades.

[1165] 2 Corinthians 4:4.

[1166] John 12:31.

[1167] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 194-197.

[1168] Hebrews 9:22-24.

[1169] This would serve as some explanation for why we don't know the location of Jesus' tomb and/or why the tomb is empty!

[1170] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 197-199.

[1171] 1 Corinthians 15:45-49.

[1172] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 200-205.

[1173] This should sound familiar. As we saw with Paul and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the sky-demons that killed Jesus didn't realise who their victim was.

[1174] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 205-206.

[1175] Ibid., pp. 206-209.

[1176] Ibid., pp. 209-214.

[1177] Philippians 2:1-11.

[1178] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 214-222.

[1179] Ibid., p. 222.

[1180] Ibid., pp. 222-225.

[1181] Ibid., pp. 225-229.

[1182] A footnote on p. 228 is well worth reading, as it explains why counter-examples, such as comparing the ‘similar’ lives of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, are flippant and unhelpful.

[1183] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 229-234.

[1184] Recalling the previous footnote about Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, these obviously historical figures failed to make the list.

[1185] This is implied throughout the New Testament, including in the Gospels. For example, Mark 2:19-20 clearly portrays Jesus as the Church’s bridegroom. I have also wondered about Christian traditions that say that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, who some considered a daughter of Satan, who in turn was ‘replaced’ by Jesus; but this seems too speculative and convoluted.

[1186] See William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp 32-34.

[1187] Almost 200 pages! This just indicates the amount of work Carrier has done. His earlier book, *Proving History*, outlined his method and serves as this book’s prelude, while his two chapters on background knowledge contain as much content as many whole academic monographs. I also cannot resist the temptation to contrast this herculean effort with Ehrman’s “obviously did exist” remark concerning his imaginary sources, and Casey’s unintentionally humours claim that Luke was an “outstanding historian”. The difference in attitudes towards evidentiary justification is quite telling.

[1188] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 235-236.

[1189] Ibid., pp. 236-237.

[1190] Ibid., p. 238.

[1191] Ibid., p. 238.

[1192] Ibid., p. 239.

[1193] Ibid., pp. 239-242. I would add that these figures are ancient, like Jesus. It would do no good to invent such stories in more modern times, about Abraham Lincoln or Kim Jong-Il, to argue that there are many more historical figures that are portrayed in this way. Of course, Carrier and I could simply create more such stories about fictional characters, to further tip the scales towards non-historical figures.

[1194] Ibid., p. 243. I will generally spare you the mathematical details, but this needs some explaining. Why is the prior not 0%? According to Cromwell’s rule we should avoid 0 or 1 for prior probabilities, unless we are dealing with logical certainties. Indeed, a calculation would be pointless with a 0! So mathematicians use Laplace’s law of succession, where 1 is added to the numerator, and 2 is added to the denominator. We thus have 1/16 = 6%.

[1195] Ibid., p. 243.

[1196] Ehrman (DJE), p. 216. Both authors seemed to have made some errors here, but it is unimportant to this discussion.

[1197] Keep in mind, however, that this point is more relevant for the consequent probabilities.

[1198] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 244-246.

[1199] Ibid., pp. 246-248.

[1200] Ehrman (DJE), pp. 215-216.

[1201] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 248-252.

[1202] Ibid., pp. 252-253.

[1203] By ignoring this information altogether, I am effectively conceding that *half* of the Rank-Raglan heroes are historical. This is obviously ridiculous, revealing just how charitable I am being.

[1204] This means "too long; didn't read". These subsections will provide a handy reminder as to where Carrier and I see the case for Jesus' a/historicity going, as each new bit of evidence is considered. Keep in mind that we are both trying to be generous to the historicity hypothesis.

[1205] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 254-256, 278-279.

[1206] Ibid., pp. 256-260.

[1207] Ibid., pp. 260-264.

[1208] Ibid., pp. 264-271.

[1209] Ibid., pp. 271-275.

[1210] Ibid., pp. 275-277.

[1211] Ibid., pp. 279-280. For example, Colossians 4:16 refers to a Pauline letter to the Laodiceans that we don't have, while 1 Corinthians 7:1 reveals that Paul is responding to letters that also have not been preserved. Also, 1 Corinthian 5:9-11 seems to refer to an earlier letter to the Corinthians (making at least three in total, instead of the two we have), and 1 Corinthians 16:3 also refers to many letters that are likely no longer extant. It's probably fair to assume that there were many other letters written by apostles or 'pillars' (such as Peter and John) that we no longer have.

[1212] Ibid., p. 278.

[1213] Ibid., p. 280.

[1214] Ibid., p. 280.

[1215] Ibid., p. 280.

[1216] See Matthew 4:23-25, 14:1, Luke 5:15.

[1217] Luke 23:44-45.

[1218] Complicating the issue further, and tipping the scales in favour of minimal mythicism, whilst we have absolutely no contemporary evidence concerning the Historical Jesus, we actually do have contemporary evidence for the belief in the Celestial Jesus, if that is indeed whom Paul and the other earliest Christians believe in.

[1219] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 281-284.

[1220] Ibid., pp. 285-286.

[1221] Ibid., p. 287.

[1222] Ibid., pp. 288-289.

[1223] Ibid., pp. 289-293.

[1224] Ibid., pp. 293-302.

[1225] Ibid., pp. 302-304.
[1226] Ibid., p. 305.
[1227] Ibid., pp. 306-307.
[1228] Ibid., p. 308.
[1229] Ibid., p. 308.
[1230] Ibid., p. 308.
[1231] Ibid., pp. 308-313.
[1232] Ibid., p. 314.
[1233] Ibid., p. 315.
[1234] Ibid., pp. 315-317.
[1235] Ibid., pp. 317-318.
[1236] Ibid., pp. 317-319.
[1237] Ibid., pp. 320-321.
[1238] Recall 1 Corinthians 2:7-10.
[1239] Mark 1:12-13, Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13.
[1240] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 322-323.
[1241] Ibid., pp. 323-326.
[1242] Ibid., pp. 326-327.
[1243] Ibid., pp. 327-331.
[1244] As with apologists' 'bracketing' of miraculous claims.
[1245] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 332-337.
[1246] Ibid., pp. 337-342.
[1247] Ibid., p. 342.
[1248] Ibid., pp. 342-343.
[1249] Ibid., pp. 343-344.
[1250] Ibid., pp. 345-346.
[1251] Ibid., p. 346.
[1252] Ibid., pp. 346-347. Carrier also makes brief mention of the Phlegon reference, which is similarly problematic. He also goes beyond mere agnosticism, thinking that Thallus and Phlegon probably didn't even mention Jesus in the original forms of these passages.
[1253] Ibid., pp. 347-349.
[1254] Ibid., p. 349.
[1255] Including the general lack of gainsaying about Gospel claims regarding the Biblical Jesus! Indeed, even in their contradictions the later Gospels don't say 'the earlier Gospels were wrong', they just rewrite the story. See ibid., pp. 353-356.
[1256] Ibid., pp. 349-351.
[1257] Ibid., pp. 351-352.
[1258] Ibid., p. 352.

[1259] Ibid., p. 352.

[1260] And yet, majority atheists happily accept the Biblical or Gospel Jesus as a fiction, whilst stubbornly clinging to a Historical Jesus. Also, if you have reservations about Carrier's point, consider that we'd have more doubts about Abraham Lincoln's being a vampire hunter, than about the humdrum existence of some poor farmer called Bobby-Joe McGonagall, despite the fact that Honest Abe existed, and I just made up the latter.

[1261] Carrier (OHJ), p. 356.

[1262] Ibid., pp. 356-358.

[1263] Ibid., p. 359.

[1264] Ibid., p. 360.

[1265] Ibid., pp. 360-368.

[1266] Ibid., pp. 368-371.

[1267] Ibid., pp. 371-375.

[1268] Ibid., pp. 374-375.

[1269] Ibid., pp. 375-380.

[1270] Ibid., pp. 381-383.

[1271] Ibid., pp. 383-384.

[1272] Ibid., pp. 385-386.

[1273] Ibid., p. 387.

[1274] Ibid., p. 388.

[1275] Ibid., pp. 389-390.

[1276] Ibid., pp. 391-393. Recall the earlier point that differences are actually expected, and do not explain away similarities between traditions.

[1277] Ibid., pp. 394-395.

[1278] Ibid., pp. 396-397.

[1279] Ibid., pp. 398-399.

[1280] Ibid., p. 399.

[1281] Ibid., pp. 402-403.

[1282] Ibid., p. 404. Recall also that Christ offered a spiritual victory, with the physical attempts being obviously impossible or having already failed. Cf. p. 407.

[1283] Ibid., pp. 404-406.

[1284] Ibid., p. 408.

[1285] Ibid., p. 410.

[1286] Ibid., pp. 411-422.

[1287] Mark 1:15.

[1288] Mark 4:9-12.; Carrier (OHJ), p. 419.

[1289] Ibid., pp. 423-428. Conservative scholars would probably say that this is all evidence of God's power and planning, but secular scholars should concede that this is evidence of Mark's crafting the tale to suit his own ends.

[1290] Ibid., pp. 428-430.

[1291] Ibid., pp. 430-432.

[1292] Ibid., pp. 433-435.

[1293] Ibid., p. 436.

[1294] Ibid., p. 436.

[1295] Ibid., pp. 437-442. Additionally, I find that the 'messianic secret' theme makes little sense, historically or theologically. However, it somewhat parallels the sea-faring Odysseus' hiding amongst his wife's suitors in Homer's *Odyssey*.

[1296] Ibid., pp. 443-444.

[1297] A cheeky reference to Pythagoras, perhaps? Not so important, but another indication of Pagan influence.

[1298] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 444-453.

[1299] Ibid., pp. 452-456.

[1300] Ibid., pp. 456-457.

[1301] Ibid., pp. 457-459.

[1302] Ibid., p. 459.

[1303] Ibid., p. 464.

[1304] Ibid., p. 460.

[1305] Ibid., pp. 460-463.

[1306] Ibid., p. 463.

[1307] Ibid., p. 464.

[1308] Ibid., pp. 465-469.

[1309] Ibid., p. 469.

[1310] Ibid., pp. 469-470.

[1311] Ibid., pp. 471-473.

[1312] Ibid., pp. 474-485.

[1313] Ibid., pp. 485-486.

[1314] Ibid., p. 487.

[1315] Ibid., pp. 487-489.

[1316] Ibid., pp. 490-491.

[1317] Ibid., p. 492.

[1318] I keep stressing this to counter the perception that Historical Jesus sceptics such as Carrier and myself don't solely appeal to fellow sceptics, and to reveal that the foundation for such Jesus scepticism is actually well placed in mainstream academia.

[1319] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 493-499.

[1320] Ibid., pp. 500-505.

[1321] While not so relevant, I wonder if the meaning of the name, 'God has helped', suits Lazarus' place in the overall story. In both Luke and John, we have a Lazarus who 'God has helped'. See Luke 16:19-31 and John 11. For those who erroneously think that God helps

everyone, see Numbers 31 and the book of Joshua. Also consider the flood narrative of Genesis 6-9.

[1322] This also reveals that John's gospel is woefully out of order. See Carrier (OHJ), p. 502.

[1323] Ibid., p. 502.

[1324] Ibid., p. 506. Compare John 5:5-10 with Mishnah, *Shabbat* 7.2 (lines L and M).

[1325] Ibid., p. 506.

[1326] Ibid., pp. 506-507. Later (p. 510), Carrier upholds Pliny as what a decent – though not perfect – ancient historian actually looks like.

[1327] Ibid., pp. 508-509.

[1328] Ibid., p. 509.

[1329] If there is a better way to describe the utter desperation of the case for the Historical Jesus at this point, whilst using pop culture references (i.e. Peter Jackson's highly emotive *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy), I'd like to hear it.

[1330] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 510-511.

[1331] Ibid., p. 512.

[1332] Ibid., pp. 513-514. Carrier proclaims that historicists tend to be grossly illogical, and points to the work of historian David Hackett Fisher, who revealed how illogical many historians can be. See David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). Cf. my ubiquitous assertion that historicists look upon the Epistles with the truth of the Gospels' story already assumed, though the Gospels are the later documents.

[1333] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 514-515.

[1334] Ibid., p. 515.

[1335] Ibid., pp. 515-518.

[1336] Ibid., p. 518.

[1337] Ibid., p. 519.

[1338] Ibid., pp. 519-520.

[1339] Ibid., pp. 520-521. Recall my earlier discussion of Mark as an allegorisation of Paul's writings.

[1340] Ibid., pp. 524-525.

[1341] Ibid., p. 526.

[1342] Ibid., pp. 526-527.

[1343] Ibid., p. 528.

[1344] Ibid., p. 528.

[1345] Ibid., p. 529.

[1346] This is supposed to be Jesus' closest disciple, on whom he built his church! Cf. Matthew 16:18.

[1347] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 530-531.

[1348] Cf. Ibid., p. 531.

[1349] Cf. 2 Corinthians 11:4, which could indicate that alternative views of Jesus appeared quite early on, and possibly demonstrates this phenomenon from the other side. The passage and context has Paul, who we think believes in a purely Celestial Jesus, warning his readers about false prophets with false views about Jesus. For a classic example of such a warning from one of the forged epistles mentioned, see 1 John 4:2-3, which seems to criticise those who think that Jesus had not come "in the flesh".

[1350] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 531-536.

[1351] Ibid., pp. 537-538.

[1352] Ibid., pp. 539-540.

[1353] Ibid., pp. 540-541.

[1354] Ibid., pp. 541-544.

[1355] Ibid., pp. 544-552.

[1356] Ibid., p. 551.

[1357] Ibid., pp. 544-552.

[1358] Ibid., p. 553-554.

[1359] Ibid., p. 554.

[1360] Ibid., p. 555.

[1361] Ibid., pp. 555-557.

[1362] Ibid., p. 557.

[1363] Ibid., pp. 558-560.

[1364] Ibid., pp. 561-562.

[1365] As earlier discussed, it is quite remarkable that Paul makes no mention of Jesus' great deeds and miracles, in life, whether here on Earth or up above. It seems that Paul only really finds Jesus relevant from the moment he died.

[1366] Carrier (OHJ), p. 563.

[1367] Paul almost always uses it to refer to sky-demons.

[1368] Carrier (OHJ), p. 564.

[1369] Ibid., pp. 565-566.

[1370] Ibid., p. 566.

[1371] See Romans 13:4 and 1 Peter 2:13-14.

[1372] Again, see Romans 13:4. I seem to recall a Christian teaching (though it appears later, in the Gospels) about the inability to serve two masters. See Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13.

[1373] Carrier (OHJ), p. 566.

[1374] Ibid., pp. 567-568.

[1375] Ibid., pp. 570-573.

[1376] Ibid., p. 574.

[1377] Ibid., p. 574.

[1378] See Romans 9:5, 15:8, 15:12, and the non-Pauline Hebrews 7:11-17.

[1379] Carrier (OHJ), p. 575.

[1380] See Ehrman (OCS), pp. 238-239.

[1381] Carrier (OHJ), p. 576.

[1382] For example, check out Genesis 6:1-4. Angels shagging human women? What? Even Paul seems to get in on the action, warning women to cover their heads, 'because of the angels' (!) in 1 Corinthians 11:10. Note that while the meaning of both verses is contested, they share similarities with similarly sexy tales – which are far less ambiguous – found in the intertestamental literature. At least we now know where giants, dragons, and other monsters, came from. And, of course, there is the talking snake, the chopping off of foreskins to purchase a wife, and the notion that homosexuals should be punished for being the way God made them. We could go on, and on, and on… but we atheists are already well aware that these people believed some pretty crazy things. To say that this 'cosmic sperm bank' idea is too bizarre to have been a Jewish or Christian belief is, ironically, to be disrespectful; to them, and to other types of religious believers.

[1383] As with the earlier example, some translations might say 'born', but 'made' is preferred. Later Christians knew the difference and tried to change it in such verses, as even our good friend Bart Ehrman recognises. Again see Ehrman (OCS), pp. 238-239.

[1384] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 577-581. For the reference on Jesus having being born to a celestial woman, see Irenaeus' *Against All Heresies* 1.30.1-3.

[1385] Ibid., pp. 581-582.

[1386] Ibid., pp. 582-583.

[1387] Ibid., p. 584.

[1388] For example, see Philippians 1:12-14.

[1389] On Jesus preferring his followers to his mother, sisters, and brothers, see Matthew 12:46-50. For Jesus' poignant musings on the fate of prophets, see Mark 6:4.

[1390] 1 Corinthians 4:15.

[1391] Carrier (OHJ), p. 584.

[1392] Romans 1:4.

[1393] Carrier (OHJ), p. 585.

[1394] Cf. Ibid., p. 586.

[1395] Ibid., p. 586.

[1396] Ibid., pp. 587-591. Recall again that the Gospels are the *later* documents, and that the Gospel writers happily elaborate and make things up.

[1397] Ibid., pp. 591-592.

[1398] Ibid., p. 593.

[1399] Ibid., pp. 593-594.

[1400] Ibid., pp. 594-595.

[1401] Again, this is relative. 100:100 = 50:50 = 20:20, etc. It is not to say that this is exactly (truly 100%) what we expect, but that both theories are equally likely.

[1402] Carrier (OHJ), p. 596.

[1403] Ibid., pp. 597-599. The layout here may be confusing to those not so mathematically inclined, particularly as he – unnecessarily, I think – employs the odds form of Bayes' Theorem (this is one advantage of a summary, such as this one). But after checking

numerous times (and even correcting him on minor errors I identified in a pre-publication copy), I can confirm that the calculations are sound.

[1404] Ibid., pp. 599-600.

[1405] Ibid., pp. 600-601.

[1406] If this can't be done, then nobody should accept the presupposition as probable.

[1407] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 601-606.

[1408] Ibid., p. 606.

[1409] Ibid., pp. 607-608.

[1410] Ibid., p. 609.

[1411] This was brilliantly demonstrated by a particularly renowned scholar of Religious Studies. See Cusack (IR).

[1412] Carrier (OHJ), pp. 609-610.

[1413] I shall soon argue that the only reasonable recourse for critics is to attack the inherent plausibility (i.e. the prior probability) of the minimal mythicism hypothesis, and that the objection Carrier now addresses is the only way they seem to do so. And it fails.

[1414] Not the movie, of course. This pop culture pun was too tempting to avoid… Incidentally, Leeloo does seem very Christ-like. But seriously, Element 5 outlined the evidence for Jewish notions of a suffering/dying messiah.

[1415] Carrier (OHJ), p. 610.

[1416] Ibid., pp. 613-615.

[1417] Ibid., pp. 615-616.

[1418] Ibid., pp. 610-614.

[1419] Ibid., p. 617.

[1420] Ibid., pp. 617-618.

[1421] Ibid., p. 618.

[1422] Ibid., p. 618.

[1423] Please note that I have actually simplified Carrier's analysis, and thus possibly treated historicity even more favourably. Minimal mythicism does not have to actually entail a celestial or outer space Jesus; it could still work with a Jesus that was considered crucified on Earth, mythically, or supernaturally. Cf. beliefs about the Garden of Eden: we don't know where it was/is, and no 'ordinary people' witnessed the associated events. Nevertheless, most of the probability space for mythicism is reasonably taken up by the theory entailing a purely celestial Jesus. See ibid., p. 563.

[1424] To illustrate further, consider the scenario where 3 mythicist theories, each 20% probable, collectively take up 60% of the probability space, meaning that ahistoricity is probably true. This grouping together of certain theories has not been done arbitrarily; they all entail Jesus' non-existence. As for the rest of the probability-space, minimal historicity is 40% probable, meaning it is actually improbable, but could be perceived as being the most probable theory. Because in this scenario, minimal historicity is twice as likely as any other individual theory. Yay!

[1425] Rather than outrage, this 'revelation' should attract sympathy. For both sets of scholars. For historicists, it surely cannot be easy to face losing their jobs. For ahistoricists, we currently face derision and multiple roadblocks regarding publishing and employment. We can

even have some sympathy for Christians. As a former Christian myself, I can empathise with the pain and confusion that such realisations would cause.

[1426] This format should hopefully align with the earlier discussed notion of the story's evolution. Reading the list in reverse order may also be interesting, as it reveals how much murkier the situation gets as we continuously delve into earlier sources.

[1427] See James Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 171.

[1428] Raphael Lataster. The Washington Post. "Did historical Jesus really exist? The evidence just doesn't add up.," accessed 31/12/2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/18/did-historical-jesus-exist-the-traditional-evidence-doesnt-hold-up/.

[1429] Name removed due to protestations. Given the success of the article, which reach a multitude of readers and broke the comment counter, one might expect an author to be grateful for being mentioned. Nevertheless, several mainstream scholars do hold such a view about Jesus.

[1430] Raphael Lataster. The Conversation. "Weighing up the evidence for the 'Historical Jesus'," accessed 31/12/2014, http://theconversation.com/weighing-up-the-evidence-for-the-historical-jesus-35319.; Raphael Lataster. The Washington Post. "Did historical Jesus really exist? The evidence just doesn't add up.," accessed 31/12/2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/18/did-historical-jesus-exist-the-traditional-evidence-doesnt-hold-up/.

[1431] Dickson (LJ), pp. 161-162.

[1432] John Dickson. ABC. "It's Beginning to Look a lot Like Christmas ... Mythicism's in the Air," accessed 31/12/2014, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/12/24/4154120.htm.

[1433] As noted earlier, I, like most philosophers, are well versed in the language of logic. Basically we're those annoying people you never want to get into an argument with. Analytic (and atheistic) philosophers would surely be among the most logical people on Earth, and throughout history.

[1434] A charge he often levels at me, despite the fact that I, unlike himself, have numerous peer-reviewed articles published on this very topic.

[1435] For example, in quasi-public discussions, he likes to point to my lack of a doctorate, and thus says that I am not a scholar. Aside from the fact that I will have a relevant doctorate in around one year, this is shameful behaviour, and desperate. Are the arguments of these apologetic scholars so poor that they need to resort to *ad hominem* attacks and appeals to the (heavily stacked) majority? Obviously, yes.

[1436] He consistently questions my credentials, for example, though on one occasion, if I recall correctly, he seemed to admit that he felt 'dirty' for doing so. Interestingly, on another occasion, he essentially admitted to me that the 'Biblical Jesus' cannot be proven historically.

[1437] See Gavin Rumney. OTAGOsh. "The latest HJ/Mythicist Stoush," accessed 05/02/2015, http://otagosh.blogspot.com.au/2014/12/prof-dickson-has-hernia.html.

[1438] John Dickson. ABC. "How Reza Aslan's Jesus is giving history a bad name," accessed 09/02/2015, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/08/09/3822264.htm.

[1439] I have also debated one of Dickson's scholarly colleagues.

[1440] Note also how Dickson contradicts Paul, who explicitly said that he did not know such things from human sources. Yes, a Bible-believing Christian just contradicted the Bible, in order to support the Bible. Again, these people seem incapable of even rudimentary logic.

[1441] Michael Bird. Euangelion. “Taking on the Jesus Mythicists,” accessed 05/02/2015, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2015/1/taking-on-the-jesus-mythicists/.

[1442] Michael Bird. The National Forum. “Yes, Jesus existed … but relax, you can still be an atheist if you want to,” accessed 05/02/2015, http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=16974&page=0.

[1443] This further speaks to the insular nature of Historical Jesus scholarship. Journals dealing with other fields are more open to publishing such hypercritical work. Recall my piece on Ehrman’s law being rejected by a Biblical Studies seminar, but being accepted by a general History seminar.

[1444] He also seems to ignore that several of Casey’s arguments are rejected by most scholars, such as those revolving around the very early dating of the Gospels. It is almost if McGrath’s Christian beliefs cloud his judgement so that he can’t see that even by secular historicists’ standards, Casey’s book is woeful. See the uncritical review at: James McGrath. Society of Biblical Literature. “Maurice Casey - *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?*,” accessed 27/06/2015, http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/9729_10748.pdf. If that leaves a bad taste in your mouth, feel free to read my summarised review of Casey’s book again, and appreciate how a little bit of real criticism makes a big difference to how work is perceived: Raphael Lataster, review of *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?*, by Maurice Casey, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 166-168.

[1445] For Casey, see Casey (JEAMM), p. 154. As for McGrath, he is a Christian.

[1446] James McGrath, *The Burial of Jesus: History and Faith* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2008), pp. 37-38.

[1447] James McGrath. “When Bart Ehrman and Mike Bird Agree,” accessed 05/02/2015, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2014/12/when-bart-ehrman-and-mike-bird-agree.html.

[1448] He then later blogged about this little discussion, omitting its crucial conclusion. For someone who hasn’t yet made his case, and doesn’t understand how ridiculous the methods of Jesus historicists are (shall I tell you again about the imaginary sources?), he sure does talk a lot about it.

[1449] See “Jesus ‘not a real person’ many believe.” BBC. accessed 04/11/2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34686993.

[1450] Note that even the more professional Ehrman and Casey published their *pro* cases in more popular-level books.